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Providence: from pronoia to immanent affirmation in John Calvin's Institutes of 1559

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Providence: from *pronoia* to immanent affirmation
in John Calvin's Institutes of 1559

A dissertation presented

by

Michelle Chaplin Sanchez

to

The Committee on the Study of Religion

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

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in the subject of

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Providence: from *pronoia* to immanent affirmation

In John Calvin's Institutes of 1559

Abstract

Over the twentieth century and into the present, theorists of secularization and political theology have explored ways that theological arguments have shaped the social, ethical, economic, and political imaginaries of the modern West. In many of these studies, the doctrine of providence has come under scrutiny alongside related theological debates over the nature of divine sovereignty, glory, the will, and the significance of immanent life in relation to divine transcendence. While it is often taken for granted that the Calvinist branch of Protestant reform likewise had a decisive impact on the shape of the modern West, there has been no extended treatment of Calvin's writing on providence, or related doctrines, which engages these arguments about secularization.

In this dissertation, I argue that Calvin's *Institutes* of 1559 presents an excellent example of an intellectual project operating self-consciously at the intersection of the Christian theological tradition and the project of church and political reform, while also pedagogically addressing the reader on an individual level. In this study, I perform a double intervention. On the one hand, I make a critical contribution to philosophical and historical conversations on secularization by offering a reading of Calvin's *Institutes* that is critically responsive to these conversations. On the other hand, I provide a reading of Calvin's doctrine of providence that challenges the common notion that it suggests a deterministic view of divine transcendence. I argue instead that Calvin's doctrine of providence anchors his larger project of reform by reframing the locus of divine power outside the institutional bounds of the church and in an affirmative relation to the world more generally.

In my argument, I explore how Calvin's theology demonstrates an interest in ways that texts, writing, and signification work to shape and organize the human ability to represent and navigate world. To do so, I connect Calvin's argument about providence to his theory of sacramental signification. I also explore the relationship between texts and bodily practices across Calvin's *Institutes*. Finally, I relate the political implications of this sixteenth-century theological work to more recent arguments about secularization from Weber, Nietzsche, Lefort, Kantorowicz, Gauchet, and Agamben.

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Thanks to my mother, Jennifer Chaplin, who has been my most abiding friend as well as my earliest and most important theological interlocutor. Growing up in her care, it was always given that theological ideas shape our most profound human desires, and that learning to savor life means learning to think about these things with increasing precision. While neither her education nor her community encouraged her to develop her own theological voice, I am forever glad that she was strong-minded enough to give me mine—and that she *wanted* to proofread these pages!

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These years have not been without their difficulties. During the time I prepared and wrote this dissertation, I have witnessed the suffering of two people who are very important to me. My first doctoral advisor, Ronald Thiemann, died of pancreatic cancer on the very day I submitted the prospectus for this dissertation. Its contours had been hammered out in a series of conversations that took place in his office, and the memory of all that he taught me haunts these pages. I miss him very much. He and I would often reflect on our respective Lutheran and Calvinist roots, at times regretting the ways our traditions had turned theological arguments into weapons. Yet, Ron always encouraged me to recall the full range of ways in which these theologies can also attune practitioners to the beauty and mystery of human life, enabling startling acts of goodness and justice both in and beyond the borders of the church.

The best example of such a living faith has always been my father, Norman Chaplin. Over the last five years, I have watched a brutal, degenerative disease remove his ability to talk and reason. Yet I will never forget the way his unwavering love of God always prompted his love for life, the world, and other people. Although his daily work often consisted of hard labor and struggle, he was never slow to smile or to savor a sunset or a song. He treated animals, plants, and other people of all shapes, sizes, colors, statuses, and walks of life as equally deserving of dignity, care and service. If his disease has made me doubt goodness at times, the memory of his life assures me all the more that there is some goodness shining behind and within the frailty of this existence. To my father and to Ron: this is for you.

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Introduction

John Calvin resides in the rarefied company of those theologians who are read both too much and too little. While Calvin's name continues to carry currency for historians, sociologists, and religious communities—and, indeed, for many Calvin remains a household name—Calvin's own writing is often overlooked not only by his own followers, but by the growing body of philosophical literature interested in the theological origins of modernity.¹ In this work, I argue that another look at Calvin's writing will prove worthwhile—will perhaps even reveal something fresh and illuminative of a wide array of contemporary questions and interests. I am well aware of the blessing and burden that accompanies any attempt to re-read a figure like Calvin. History, though not always rightly, often disposes its long-dead “great men” into categories of general admiration or easy contempt. Calvin is among the smaller set whose legacy is marked by extreme polarization, to the point of apparent contradiction. This is no doubt the result of many complicated factors: the fights that marked the landscape of sixteenth century Europe and left deep scars on all parties in their wake; the varied behavior of self-described “Calvinists” over the centuries and into the present; and, not least, the association of his Protestant legacy with a “Western modernity”² that manifests many of these same contradictions.

¹ As I will show in chapter one, scholars of secularization theory and political theology have become interested in studying the intellectual debates and contributions of late medieval and early modern theologians as formative in some way for modern methods and conceptualizations of ethical and political life. Among these authors—I think particularly of contributions by Amos Funkenstein, Marcel Gauchet, Giorgio Agamben, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Michael Gillespie, and Genevieve Lloyd—none have given any extended attention to Calvin's thought, if they mention Calvin's influence at all.

² “Western modernity” is a contested term which I will nonetheless continue to employ at various times with some important caveats. First, the term “Western” provides a recognizable shorthand for the particular locale that manifests the shifts in attitudes toward the natural world and politics that are of particular interest to this project. That locale is Western Europe and North America—and more specifically, particular geographic regions affected by the Protestant reformations. In using this shorthand, I recognize that the “West” is a contested term, and that this contestation involves a number of other religious and ethnic groups (particularly Catholics, Jews, Muslims) who make a rightful claim in shaping modernity.

I. The Puzzles of Calvinism and Modernity

The shift in a range of attitudes toward knowledge, social organization, and values that is commonly referred to as “modernity”—and which begins in sixteenth century Europe—is, on the one hand, associated with a number of developments that many will view as positive without reservation: increasing recognition of minority groups, women, and children; the repudiation of slavery in many parts of the world; staggering advances in life-saving and life-improving technologies; longer lifespans with a higher quality of life for many; wider access to education; and less regulated access to knowledge through information technology. Yet, this shift is also linked to assumptions concerning rationality, knowledge, and nature that reinforce ongoing waves of imperial conquest and colonization, increasingly precise modes of discipline and surveillance over human bodies, the mechanization and rationalization of war and genocide, unprecedented threats to the planet and its environment through weapons and industrialization, and new forms of alienation fostered by digital media and multi-national financial and business conglomerates. Amid this field of shifting values, assumptions, methods, and their varied consequences, it makes little sense to treat modernity either with wholesale praise or blame. Instead, if one hopes to understand the contours of the present and participate in the formation of a better future, we face the task of continuing to critically assess the relationship between the values that drive these enterprises, the complex conditions and concerns that gave rise to them, and the range of their consequences.

At the same time, modernity is a similar shorthand used to indicate many things. For my purposes, “modernity” refers both to shifts in attitude toward nature, politics, knowledge and ethics that are largely traceable to the events and texts of sixteenth-eighteenth century Europe. These include the development of the scientific method, heliocentric cosmology, shifting practices toward medicine, the mathematization (or mechanization) of nature, new conceptions of reason tied to methods of empirical study, the rise of the nation-state and increasing confidence in democratic procedures, increasing interest in concepts of universal human rights and values placed on minority rights, and religious toleration. I will argue several times that these characteristics of modernity are replete with empirical and conceptual tensions. This cannot but impact the overall specificity and usefulness of the term “modern” or “modernity.” It remains, however, a recognizable term for both a period and a set of values and questions in much of the literature with which I converse in this project.

In an analogous and more specific way, the historical personae of Calvinism are at once progressive and repressive, open and intolerant, critical and doctrinaire, earthly and transcendent, secular and separatist. For example, it is not uncommon to associate the Calvinist lands of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with theocratic or authoritarian tendencies—in fact, in many circles and for some good reasons, such an image has become nearly synonymous with Calvin’s Geneva, Knox’s Scotland, the Dutch Calvinists, and both English and New England Puritans. Yet the civic spirit of Geneva, the Netherlands, and New England, in particular, have at certain times and in different ways become linked to tolerance for religious and ethnic minorities, efforts at education and social welfare, and unprecedented innovation and prosperity. While these achievements are always ambivalent, they retain much to be admired—and historically speaking, they cannot be simply attributed to the rejection of the Calvinist legacy.³ In Geneva, for example, many of Calvin’s teachings and watchwords shaped the self-representation of Geneva well into the eighteenth and nineteenth century, when the city was on its way to becoming the international center that it is today.⁴ Similarly, the relative openness of the Dutch Golden Age occurred under a polity for which Calvinism was the official confession.⁵ And the complicated legacy of Puritanism in relation to New England educational progressivism has been well

³ Often, historians treat these manifestations as traceable to such things as economic prosperity and the values of open trade. I want to resist this easy assumption for several reasons. First, it uncritically cedes authority to the conserving voices within religious communities while ignoring the religious commitments of those who practice their faith and organize their lives in less polemical ways. Second, the general approach of recent secularization theory and historical sociology since Weber have helpfully opened up the question of religion’s “unintended” effects in shaping deeply-held values or assumptions. Recently, Philip Gorski’s *The Disciplinary Revolution: Calvinism and the Rise of the State in Early Modern Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) is an example of how the relationship between religious values and larger social trends may be fruitfully explored. I will explore this and other works that more capaciously treat the effects of religious belief, thought and practice at greater length in chapter one.

⁴ See Robert M. Kingdon, “International Calvinism,” *The Handbook of European History: Visions, Outcomes, Programs*, ed. Thomas A. Brady, Heiko A. Oberman, and James D. Tracy (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995) and Pamela A. Mason, “The Communion of Citizens: Calvinist Themes in Rousseau’s Theory of the State,” *Polity* 26:1 (Autumn, 1993): 25-49.

⁵ See R. Po-Chia Hsia and Henk Van Nierop, eds., *Calvinism and Religious Toleration in the Dutch Golden Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

documented.⁶ I offer these general observations to underscore a conviction that undergirds my work, namely, that understanding Calvinism's impact on ethics, society, politics, and ways of thinking means recognizing that Calvinists have always participated in a complex negotiation of values, a negotiation that points to the inherent diversity that exists at the heart of this, as any, tradition. At the same time, these observations point to a puzzle: how can we better account for the diverse, even contradictory beliefs and values that shape and undergird the wide array of social, ethical, and political manifestations of Calvinist societies?

The purpose of this study is to bring these wider interests to Calvin's theology, and particularly his final edition of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559). I am interested in how that writing may have participated in or even animated a series of shifts in attitudes toward the organization of the natural world, the state, and the understanding of life—both among Calvin's followers and within modern thought more generally. As a survey of theology textbooks or early modern anthologies will attest, Calvin's theology has long been pared down and represented by several isolated summaries or chapters on predestination and church discipline—chapters often taken without context from the third and fourth books of the *Institutes*.⁷ This cannot help but severely limit how scores of students and interested readers imaginatively render the fundamental character of Calvinism, an effect that only

⁶ See David M. Hall, *A Reforming People: Puritanism and the Transformation of Public Life in New England* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011). The most prominent public voice on the relationship between Calvin's legacy and various aspects of American progressivism has been Marilynne Robinson. See her collection of essays, *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* (New York: Picador, 1998). See also the collection of essays edited by Thomas J. Davis, *John Calvin's American Legacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁷ See, for example, the following popular anthologies: James Bruce Ross and Mary M. McLaughlin, eds., *The Portable Renaissance Reader* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981); Hans J. Hillerbrand, *The Protestant Reformation* (New York: Perennial, 2009).

limits our ability to understand the perhaps-surprising range of intellectual and social contributions that Calvin's work has made with respect to the modern West.⁸

Yet, the *Institutes* has not always been read so sparingly. The more we attend to the diverse features of the many Calvinist churches, as well as the diverse features of the wider secular contexts that have been in some way formed by an encounter with Calvin's legacy, the more it becomes unsatisfying to define Calvinism as simply a belief in predestination and attention to church discipline. My aim here will be look at the structural, generic, stylistic, and argumentative features of the 1559 *Institutes* in such a way that theologians as well as historians, sociologists, and philosophers might gain some tools to better grasp the fuller range of relationships between Calvin's particular brand of church and social reform and modern European-American life. To do this most effectively, however, I will orient my reading of the *Institutes* around understanding the argumentative content and situation of Calvin's doctrine of providence within the text as a whole and in relation to Calvin's other teachings. In the next section, I will explain why providence is a particularly interesting topic of focus for this kind of project.

II. The Puzzles of Providence

Like Calvinism and modernity, the idea of providence brings its own set of puzzles—not only in terms of how we should understand arguments about providence, but also in terms of how they have been deployed to shape concrete ethical practices and social and political institutions. Today, the term

⁸ Calvin's interest in the Eucharist offers a particularly striking example. His initial subversive activities were largely aimed at critiquing transubstantiation and the general power dynamics he perceived between the monarchy and the Church's Eucharistic performance in early sixteenth-century France. This interest cuts through Calvin's career, but is habitually overlooked inasmuch as Calvinism has become so tightly linked to predestination and church and social discipline in narratives of Early Modern Europe. For an interesting treatment of the political repercussions of Calvin's Eucharistic theology, see Christopher Elwood, *The Body Broken: The Calvinist Doctrine of the Eucharist and the Symbolization of Power in France, 1530-1570* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). I will return to this in the conclusion.

providence has fallen almost entirely out of common use, even within many religious communities whose traditions once held it dear. The reason for this no doubt deserves its own study, especially since it suggests something salient about the character of modernity. After all, providence was nearly ubiquitous in many traditions of Western thought going back to Platonic and then Stoic writings, both Greek and Latin. It was easily adapted to early Christian thought and thereafter assumed a central place in virtually every influential Christian text from the church fathers through the high Middle Ages and the period of reform, even continuing into the writing of seventeenth-century philosophers such as Leibniz and Vico.⁹ From the eighteenth century onward, however, the term becomes less common and more specialized; it is retained in systematic theology,¹⁰ but begins to drop out of wider philosophical use. For some, providence would come to be seen as a kind of relic of premodern thought rendered obsolete by factors ranging from modern science to the modern experience of suffering following the Lisbon earthquake of 1755.¹¹

One question, then, is whether the disappearance of providence from more general philosophical discourse signals its obsolescence or instead its secularization into non-theological

⁹ See Giambattista Vico's *Nueva Ciencia* (1725), English edition *New Science* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984) and Gottfried Leibniz's *Théodicée* (1710), English edition: *Theodicy* (New York: Cosimo Books, 2009). For a study of how providence is deployed in these texts, see Amos Funkenstein's *Theology and the Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986).

¹⁰ From Charles Hodge's *Systematic Theology* (London and Edinburgh, Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1872) to Karl Barth's *Kirchliche Dogmatik* (4 vols, 1932-67), English edition *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956-75), providence has assumed an unquestioned place in the order of Reformed systematics.

¹¹ Voltaire's satirization of Leibnizian providential optimism in *Candide* (1759) (London: Penguin Books, 1947) is often seen as a watershed moment in which providence comes to be seen as an obsolete or naïve idea. This is due in part to the particular way Leibniz formulates the notion of providence. As another later example of the evident anxiety over the credibility of providence from within the discipline of doctrinal theology, see G. C. Berkouwer's *The Providence of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), especially chapter one, "The Crisis of the Providence Doctrine in Our Century." See also C. F. C. Coetzee, "The Doctrine of Providence in the Institutes of Calvin—Still Relevant?" in "John Calvin, 1509-2009: A South African Perspective." Edited by C. J. Smith, W. A. Dreyer, and J. J. Gerber, supplement, *In die Skriflig* 44, no. S3 (2010): S145-S166. And finally for a more recent analysis from a critical perspective, see Iain Wilkinson, "The problem of suffering as a driving force of rationalization and social change," *The British Journal of Sociology* Volume 64:1 (2013): 123-41.

spheres. To approach this question, it is necessary to provide a fuller account for what I will call the discourse on providence—the diverse statements and practices that have commonly surrounded the intellectual history of providence. Much more will be said about this in the chapters that follow, but in the most general sense, providence (Greek *pronoia*, Latin *providentia*—literally “foresight” or “oversight”) concerns the holistic order and meaning of the world. It is therefore an intellectual discourse that addresses features of concrete life and human experience, including human suffering, and thus aims to in some way connect transcendence (God, necessity, nature holistically speaking) to immanence (concrete, present material circumstances). In this sense, providence addresses two distinct but interrelated questions. First, how is the world as we find it governed? And second, to what end is the world ordered—if it is?

To the extent that claims about providence are seen as obsolete vestiges of an earlier time, this may be due to the tendency of human beings to see themselves as central actors in governing the world.¹² That is, a discourse on providence that hinges on the divine will as the determinant of order seems to carry with it a certain fatalism with respect to the world’s events, a fatalism that modern subjects see as morally dangerous inasmuch as it inhibits efforts toward social improvement. At the same time, however, a number of political philosophers and social historians over the last century have noticed that while providence may seem unconvincing to many as an *answer* to questions of order and purpose, these *questions* nonetheless remain at the center of human moral and political efforts. Many may no longer talk about providence, yet they remain very concerned with the questions with which it deals: how *is* the world governed? And how *should* the world be ordered? Toward what *end*?

A number of theories of secularization and so-called political theology have emerged from this basic insight. Even if belief in God no longer functions as axiomatic for many who are interested in

¹² See Wilkinson, 126. I will discuss this further in chapter one.

questions concerning the meaning, order and governance of the world, certain symbolic resources for addressing these questions may remain inscribed within contemporary philosophical attempts to address them in secular terms. For someone like Karl Löwith, this observation constitutes an indictment of modernity's supposedly self-consistent approach to the philosophy of history within an immanent frame. For Hans Blumenberg, however, the persistence of similarly-structured questions should not be confused with the continuity of ideas themselves. In his view, European modernity exists in a negative relation to its theological past, arising out of the inexorable tensions that came to mark debates over categories like providence.¹³

Since the Löwith-Blumenberg debate of the 1960s, others, such as Funkenstein, Claude Lefort, Marcel Gauchet, Michael Gillespie, and Giorgio Agamben, have given accounts of secularization that are more nuanced, moving beyond the dichotomy set up by Blumenberg between secularization as either the transfer or legitimate rejection of a theological past. In different ways, each of these authors argues that secular questions of governance, order and meaning carry forward traces of this theological discourse insofar as they retain the structural need to negotiate transcendence. Funkenstein, for example, points out that modern contextual historiography relies on, minimally, the regulative principle of a providential order to history in order to undergird a coherent narrative. Lefort and Gauchet, both of whom I will discuss in greater depth in chapter one, similarly argue that modern political theory is indebted to the symbolic resources of theology in order to give an account of how political practices and institutions negotiate transcendence and immanence within secular life.¹⁴ Agamben, to whom I will also

¹³ Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949); Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983). I will return to this debate in some more detail in chapter one.

¹⁴ I will discuss these in greater detail in chapter one. See Claude Lefort, "The Permanence of the Theologico-Political?" in *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans. David Macey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988): 213–55; Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

return, links the relationship between providential governance and transcendent divine sovereignty to the relationship between bureaucracy and media as the enactment of sovereign power that constitutes modern modes of governmentality.¹⁵

These philosophical arguments generally agree that distinctly modern disciplinary approaches to history, science, and political life variously reject theological ideas but sometimes “secularize” such ideas by implementing their conceptual structure within an immanent frame or for the purposes of ordering rationalized methodologies or larger social patterns through which power becomes organized. Funkenstein writes, for example, that “the Enlightenment inherited from Christianity not its apocalypticism,¹⁶ but rather its social and pedagogical drive. The ideals of the Enlightenment were secularized, inverted Christian ideals through and through.” Such an observation acknowledges not only the coincidental presence of continuity and adjustment within ideas and practices over time, but even more importantly, that forms of Christian teaching do not occur in an argumentative vacuum but are always already pedagogical and social. In these more recent works on theories of secularization and political theology, the main concern is not whether the appropriation of theological ideas is legitimate or not; it is rather why, how, and to what extent certain theological categories have played a role in organizing—perhaps through symbolic resources or particular narratives—secular life (for better and worse).

One of the overriding purposes of my work is to contribute to these theoretical efforts by returning to the premodern writings with an eye not only to how they articulate tenets of faith, but also to how they work to shape and structure ethical and political patterns within immanent life. Part of my

¹⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

¹⁶ This is a critique of Löwith’s argument that modern philosophies of history transferred apocalypticism along with providence incoherently into an immanent frame.

aim is therefore to remember the sense in which providence—before and across Christian thought—is inscribed, or even animated by social and pedagogical (and not “merely” philosophical) aims.

Additionally, because providence has also been a discourse preeminently addressed to the embodied concerns of individual life (as I will argue in chapter two) this kind of reading will also look for ways that questions of political organization are and have been conceptually intertwined with the ethical and material concerns of particular, embodied persons.

Providence is an especially valuable way of orienting a reading of Calvin for at least three reasons. First and most generally, Calvin’s writing plays an important role in our understanding of one important branch of the sixteenth century movements of reform. While reform (like providence) plays an important role in many secularization accounts,¹⁷ little close attention has been given to Calvin’s writing and its role in the intellectual shifts occurring during this period. Second, providence is an extremely important doctrine within Calvin’s thought. It is related to, and even undergirds his infamous doctrine of predestination, as it does many other of his teachings across the itinerary of the *Institutes*. I agree with Susan Schreiner, who has written extensively on the content and medieval backdrop of Calvin’s doctrine of providence, that within the *Institutes*, providence is the “proscenium arch,” or the opening to the stage within which other doctrines are framed and assume their argumentative meaning.¹⁸ And third, from an intellectual-historical point of view, the category of providence provides a useful link between a range of other writings in which providence has been deployed and practically enacted both similarly and differently. Appreciating similarities and differences between Calvin’s account and others will enable an assessment of both the continuity and relative novelty of Calvin’s

¹⁷ Blumenberg’s *Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, Gillespie’s *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), Gauchet’s *The Disenchantment of the World*, and Taylor’s *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007) especially discuss the importance of the Protestant Reformations in shaping modernity.

¹⁸ Susan Schreiner, *The Theater of His Glory: Nature and Natural Order in the Thought of John Calvin* (Durham, NC: The Labyrinth Press, 1991). See chapter one in particular.

intellectual contribution during a period we can now appreciate as a turning point in European, American, and ultimately world history.¹⁹

Finally, because providence addresses questions of the order of the world, attention to it also opens up new avenues for understanding the more practical—ethical, political, and social—implications of Calvin’s project of reform. If Calvin’s most pressing aim is to undergird the reformation of the church and civic life in Geneva, attention to the doctrine tasked with framing the proper approach to worldly order and human responsibility is vital. Exploring the political and social repercussions of providential arguments therefore will enable me to ask how Calvin’s doctrine of providence works (in intended and unintended ways) to re-shape the order of mundane life.

III. Calvin’s Writing

In light of these intersecting theoretical and historical aims, this study is delimited by an important methodological commitment. The core of the project will focus on Calvin’s 1559 *Institutes*, and particularly on the way that this text is *written*—its structure, its language, and the array of argumentative features through which the writing aims to shape and guide a certain kind of reader toward certain ends. Close reading cannot help but be accountable to certain questions. At the widest level, mine will be accountable to the questions I have already laid out—questions stemming from the discourse on providence and recent theory concerning providence and secularization. Additionally, my reading will be accountable to the aims of Calvin’s writing both as they are laid out in his 1559 preface and as they are suggested by his pedagogical claims, style, and the structural arrangement of the text.

¹⁹ I say this not to somehow subordinate world history to European and American history in any normative sense, but simply to acknowledge the impact that Europe has had on the world through its efforts at global exploration and colonization during this precise period.

There are several reasons for my methodological focus. One has to do with choosing among the range of strategies for re-reading a figure whose work has been popularly characterized to the extent that Calvin has. There is always an impulse, to check with the “source” in order to upset certain caricatures that abound concerning such a controversial and influential figure as Calvin.²⁰ To assume a pure text waiting to be unveiled, however, would be an oversimplification.²¹ It is difficult, if not impossible, to re-read from any position other than one’s own time, location, and experience; a reader is hard-pressed, and I think ill-advised, to shed the pressing questions and concerns that made her want to check the source to begin with. The Calvin I read will thus be a Calvin accountable to and shaped by questions to which Calvin’s writings are capable of responding, but ones that the man who lived from 1509-1564 in Francophone Europe could not have anticipated. Of course, Calvin’s writing cannot be exhausted by these questions, much less by my reading. Rather, it continues to give—and that is part of the point. A text, as an arrangement of written signs, continues to give shape to the bodies who engage it perpetually, its meaning unexhausted and inexhaustible.²²

Another reason for my approach is more overtly theological, and has to do with the question of the unique work done by theological writing as well as the means through which theological writing shapes human lives and their worlds. As I look closely at Calvin’s writing, I will pay special attention to the intellectual traditions with which it engages or in which it participates, as well as the forms of embodied practice it both assumes and animates. This raises the question of what doctrinal discussions are supposed to *do* in the context of Calvin’s *Institutes*. Is the text designed as a propositional

²⁰ These may include Calvin’s association with biblicism, legalism, totalitarian aims, and an obsession with predestination in isolation from other doctrines.

²¹ In fact, this impulse underwrites one of the caricatures that obscures Calvin’s more complex doctrine of scripture—namely, that some attribute to Calvin a view of scripture as the sole and transparent source of dictated divine intention. Among the most obvious of those who forward this reading are those associated with the intellectual roots of Christian Reconstruction, especially Cornelius Van Til, Rousas John Rushdoony, and Greg Bahnsen. See, for example, Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008)

²² For more on this, see chapter one, n.74.

representation of Christian truth, as a mere summary of that which is already in the Bible? Or is there evidence in Calvin's writing of a greater awareness of the role of other aspects of human being in addition to the intellect, such as perception, bodily habit, affection and desire? I am not the only one to suggest the importance of approaching Calvin's theological writing with an eye to its multi-dimensional—rhetorical, pedagogical, practical, as well as propositional—operation. In recent years, for example, a number of works have appeared that examine Calvin's use of and appreciation for the role of images in cultivating perception.²³ At the same time, several studies have examined Calvin's deep debt to classical forms of rhetoric aimed at effecting the fuller persuasion of his readers, an understanding of the relationship between cognition and affection that shapes not only Calvin's project of reform but also his understanding of the gospel itself.²⁴ Alongside these studies, other scholars have begun to illumine the emphasis Calvin gave to the goal of participation in Christ,²⁵ and even to his emphasis on Christian practices aimed at forming Christian persons through bodily activities such as singing Psalms, prayer, and especially participating in the sacraments.²⁶ Thanks to quality research in historical theology, we now also have a better understanding of the relationship between Calvin's writings, their revisions, their generic influences, and his position with respect to traditional sources.²⁷

²³ See especially Barbara Pitkin, *What Pure Eyes Could See: Calvin's Doctrine of Faith In Its Exegetical Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) and Randall Zachman, *Image and Word in the Theology of John Calvin* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009).

²⁴ See especially Olivier Millet, *Calvin et la dynamique de la parole. Etude de rhétorique réformée* (Librairie Honoré Champion, 1992) and Serene Jones, *Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1995).

²⁵ See especially Julie Canlis, *Calvin's Ladder* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010) and J. Todd Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

²⁶ See especially Matthew Myer Boulton, *Life in God: John Calvin, Practical Formation, and the Future of Protestant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

²⁷ See Richard A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Formation of a Theological Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Susan Schreiner, *The Theater of His Glory: Nature and Natural Order in the Thought of John Calvin* (Durham, NC: The Labyrinth Press, 1991) and *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found? Calvin's Exegesis of Job from Medieval and Modern Perspectives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

All of these studies aid in articulating one of the interests that motivates my work: how Calvin's writing *itself* can be encountered as a form of a practice geared at equipping a person to actively relate divine revelation to the various spheres of immanent life. This raises the question not only of the style of argumentation Calvin employs, but also the role that argumentation assumes within the larger field of concrete exercises of embodied habituation and a more general interest in the order of immanent life. While Reformed Protestantism and modernity alike often downplay the importance of bodily rituals while opposing them to higher values of rational representation,²⁸ I want to look at the way these two are consistently interrelated in and through Calvin's writing.

This leads to a third reason for focusing on one important piece of Calvin's writing. I would like to contextualize Calvin's written arguments as part of a broader project of reform, and give attention to the strategies through which they aim to change a reader's orientation with respect to worldly institutions—including, but not limited to, the church. The writings of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries—the period of “Renaissance and Reformation,” situated at the cleavage of the “late medieval” and the “early modern”—are materially tied to a tumultuous series of events that precipitated a number of characteristic “modern turns.” These are often characterized as new emphases on individuality, statehood, universal rationality, exercises of critique, rule of law, and faith in proceduralism.²⁹ Perhaps beginning with Friedrich Nietzsche, and certainly by the time of Max Weber, this association became a topic of more critical concern. If certain features of modernity actually serve to obscure sources of

²⁸ For more on the historical relationship between Protestantism and modern approaches to ritual that rely on a problematic thought vs. practice binary, see especially Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) and Ann Taves, “The Camp Meeting and Paradoxes of Evangelical Protestant Ritual,” in *Teaching Ritual* (AAR Teaching Religious Studies Series), ed. Catherine Bell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

²⁹ For more, see Charles H. Parker and Jerry H. Bentley, eds., *Between the Middle Ages and Modernity: Individual and Community in the Early Modern World* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), “Introduction.” I would like to add a note of caution. Some suspicion is in order concerning how these kinds of lists—self-evident as they may seem—reify a certain self-stylization of modernity that obscures the complexity of the period.

meaning for embodied human life—if, for example, the turn toward the rationalization of the world precipitated disenchantment, to use Weber’s terminology—then the question of Western modernity’s relationship to the movements of reform takes on another tone, perhaps best articulated by Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age* (2007).³⁰ What role did these movements have in foregrounding such shifts in the human orientation toward the world, the sources of knowledge, and the meaning of life?

While it is taken for granted that Calvin had some impact on the later shape of the modern West, I have already noted that there has been no extended treatment of Calvin’s *writing* in conversation with these recent theoretical narratives—a gap I begin to address. Calvin’s *Institutes* presents an excellent example of an intellectual project self-consciously operating at the intersection of reform, social, and political life, while also using traditional theological resources to address and reshape these relationships. My work will thus perform a double intervention. On the one hand, I want to make a critical contribution to philosophical and historical conversations around the theological origins of modernity by reading Calvin’s writing in a way that is responsive to these larger theoretical questions. On the other hand, I hope to provide a compelling theological account of Calvin’s project that challenges the notion that Calvin’s work is largely abstract and aimed at distilling or conserving theological truths. I will argue instead that Calvin’s theological project is at once an ethical and political project, one aimed at reform and consistently attentive to embodied needs and concerns of human life.

IV. The 1559 *Institutes of the Christian Religion*

Before this introduction draws to a close, it will be helpful to give the reader an introduction to Calvin’s 1559 *Institutes* in order to foreground and concretize some of the claims I have made about Calvin’s theological project. The *Institutes* was only one text among many Calvin wrote. In fact, the

³⁰ Taylor argues that the movements of reform typify a growing obsession with reform that underwrites many of the characteristic shifts comprising what he calls the “modern social imaginary.” See especially Taylor, 61-2, 77-ff.

reformer wrote constantly—commentaries, which gave way to thousands of sermons delivered without notes, and occasional treatises on various topics including sacraments and order and discipline in the church. The *Institutes*, however, was a unique project that spanned nearly his entire career. The first edition was published 1532, which was also the year that Calvin arrived in Geneva and decided to remain at the request of his friend, fellow French refugee and Protestant reformer, Guillaume Farel. Successive editions were released throughout Calvin’s tenure in Geneva and during his brief expulsion from the city (1537-41). Latin editions appeared in 1539, 1543, 1550, and finally 1559, with French translations from Calvin’s hand in 1541, 1545, 1551, 1553, 1554, and 1560.

Given his extended attention to the *Institutes*, it seems safe to conclude that Calvin placed great importance on the content of this work and on its intended purpose in the context of his project of reform. He discusses this purpose in the preface to the final edition. There he specifies both the audience—“candidates in sacred theology”—and the purported function of the text—guiding these students “to determine what they ought especially to seek in Scripture, and to what end they ought to relate its contents.” He furthermore states that he envisions the work to serve as a central compendium of Christian teaching [*doctrina*], most practically as an accompaniment to his commentaries, so that he “shall have no need to undertake long doctrinal discussions [*dogmatibus longas disputationes*], and to digress into commonplaces [*locos communes*].”³¹ The preface also suggests that Calvin had a lot at stake in getting this teaching right, both in form and content, not only for the sake of his nascent church but also in response to nexus of relationships surrounding his city and the frailty of his own life:

Although I did not regret the labor spent [on previous editions], I was never satisfied until the work had been arranged in the order [*ordo*] now set forth. Now I trust that I have provided something that all of you will approve. In any event, I can furnish a very clear testimony of my great zeal and effort to carry out this task for God’s church [*Ecclesiae dei*]. Last winter when I

³¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. McNeill, trans. Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 4-5. I refer to the pagination of the cited printed edition only for the front matter. For all subsequent citations taken from the four books of the *Institutes*, I follow Calvin’s own divisions: book, chapter, section.

thought the quartan fever was summoning me to my death, the more the disease pressed upon me the less I spared myself, until I could leave a book behind me that might, in some measure, repay the generous invitation of godly persons [*piorum*, or “the pious”].³²

These few sentences lift up several thematic cataracts which proceed to flow deeply throughout the *Institutes*: the emphasis on order; the context of the Church (prior, it should be noted, to scripture, which has yet to be named); attention to immanent concerns, including the realities of suffering and impending death; the acknowledgment of relationships both traditional and contemporary to which the text is itself responsive; and the invocation of “piety,” which operates at a much deeper level in Calvin’s work than the mere flattery of his audience it may seem to offer here.

This term—*pietas* in Latin and *eusebeia* in Greek—carries a double invocation. On the one hand, Calvin’s use of the term functions in a strikingly similar sense to the way Augustine treats faith and love—as prerequisites and outcomes for properly receiving sacred teaching.³³ For example, Calvin writes in the opening pages of the *Institutes* that God is not known where there is no religion [*religio*] or piety [*pietas*].³⁴ In this context, piety is not properly a category of knowledge—it is never presented as a teaching in itself or a truth that can be explained. Rather, it speaks to a disposition that displays and enacts the kind of person who is able to come to know God.³⁵ On the other hand, *pietas* names an

³² *Institutes*, 3.

³³ This resonates with other traditional patterns of what might be called theological method, including Augustine’s use of charity and Anselm’s use of faith in his *Proslogion*. For each of these, a certain disposition is required in order for knowledge to be apprehended and put to appropriate use. I will discuss this at greater length in chapter four.

³⁴ Calvin, 1.2.1.

³⁵ This assessment agrees with Muller on the topic of piety: “Calvin continually exhorts his readers to piety and consistently criticizes authorities and teachings that stand in the way of piety or of the teaching of piety (*doctrina, exercitia, or stadium pietatis*), but he never describes what he is doing as a form of piety. Piety was to be conjoined with ‘teaching’ or ‘doctrine’ (*doctrina*): Calvin did not understand it as an exercise separable from his teaching, preaching, and debating” (107).

ethical and civic category central to the classical rhetorical tradition in which Calvin was well trained.³⁶

The prevalence of *pietas* in places where Augustine would simply refer to *caritas* may signal not only to the extent to which Calvin was formed by and actively embraced his humanist training, but also to the thoroughgoing civic interests that shape his view of Christian teaching.

The very title of the *Institutes* is significant in this regard: *Institutio Christianae Religionis*. The first edition of this text, appearing in 1532, also carried the subtitle “*Summa Pietatis*.”³⁷ The association of *religio* and *pietas* is very close in Calvin’s writing, as it is in the classical tradition with which Calvin was deeply familiar. For an author such as Cicero, whom Calvin was known to have read, admired, and often cited,³⁸ these words referred to practical virtues that are squarely situated in ethical discourses concerning collective life, whether political, civic, or familial. For Cicero, *pietas* tends to refer to one’s evident disposition in the various immanent spheres of duty, while *religio* speaks more specifically to one’s reverence of and obligations to the gods. As *religio* is carried over into medieval thought, however, it came almost exclusively to refer to vowed life under a rule. However, in the writing of Thomas Aquinas, *religio* remains a virtue, and specifically the chief moral virtue. Thomas writes that insofar as religion approaches nearer to God than the other virtues, it is not only the chief but also orders and directs the other virtues.³⁹ Against this classical and medieval backdrop, it seems that the aims to which the title disposes Calvin’s text can therefore be seen as collective, practical, and even

³⁶ See Serene Jones, *Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1995) and Olivier Millet, *Calvin et la dynamique de la parole. Etude de rhétorique réformée* (Librairie Honoré Champion, 1992).

³⁷ Muller speculates that Calvin dropped the subtitle precisely because he did not want to indicate that piety was itself a doctrine or something that could be taught. Muller, 107.

³⁸ See David Steinmetz’s discussion of Calvin’s relationship to Cicero. Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 241-4.

³⁹ See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 2-2.81, particularly article six.

moral,⁴⁰ resisting the individualistic gloss we have come to associate with both religion and piety in modern contexts in which religion is associated with interiority and voluntary association.

But what of *institutio*? Of the three, this word has perhaps undergone the greatest semantic shift since Calvin's time. While the modern English word "institute" is usually understood to function similarly to words such as "organization" or "establishment"—in other words, the modern cognate "institution"—the ancient and medieval Latin meanings of *institutio* conveyed a much more explicitly pedagogical valence, meaning instruction or arrangement for the purposes of education.⁴¹ The medieval Latin word *institutio* referred both to "a method of organizing speech to achieve consensus within a city, an established body of customs and norms (linguistic, literary, and other), and a system for transmitting these customs from one generation to another."⁴² Both *institutio* and *religio* thus maintain the association foregrounded in Calvin's 1559 between *pietas*, *ordo*, and the overall aim of Christian teaching. Inasmuch as we are interested in Calvin's argumentative strategies for shaping human persons who are better able to simultaneously know God and to relate this knowledge to spheres of immanent life, this particular text provides the best example of Calvin's aim to do just that—to carry forward Christian teaching directly related to organizational and social concerns.

There remains an additional reason that I find Calvin's work to be especially worthwhile in tying together the many questions that structure this project—questions of theology and embodied practice, theology and politics, and the role of the doctrine of providence in relating between these disparate spheres. Put simply, Calvin's writing demonstrates a continuing interest in how writing—or signification

⁴⁰ For a helpful discussion on the relationship between *pietas* and *religio* for Cicero and Thomas Aquinas, see James D. Garrison, *Pietas from Vergil to Dryden* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), 12-13.

⁴¹ See also Raymond Blacketer, *The School of God: Pedagogy and Rhetoric in Calvin's Interpretation of Deuteronomy* (Dordrecht: The Netherlands, 2006). Chapter two contains a helpful discussion of the relationship between Calvin's writing and Quintillian's *Institutio Oratorio*.

⁴² Jeffrey T. Schnapp, "Reading Lessons: Augustine, Proba, and the *Détournement* of Antiquity," *Stanford Literature Review* 9 (1992): 99-123, 101.

in a more general sense—shapes and organizes our experience of the world and its meaning. Across the *Institutes*, he demonstrates an attention to divinely given signs not only as vehicles for communicating ideas, but as a medium through which divine grace forms, changes, and reorients human selves in relation to God, the mundane, and other people.

We will see that a careful analysis of Calvin's views on Christian teaching, the incarnation, and sacramental signification suggests that he was largely an Augustinian in this regard, but also that Calvin intentionally reshaped aspects of this semiotic tradition in light of the needs of his unique project of church reform in Geneva. That is, for Calvin to offer an adequate critique of the church while remaining within the scope of the Christian tradition that so emphasizes the church as the proper site for receiving divine signs, he must be able to carve out a material site for receiving divine signification that is in principle wider than the historic bounds of the institutional church itself. I will argue that it is in part for this very reason that the creation itself—and thus the doctrine of providence—assumes such a central role in Calvin's pedagogical project. In order to carve out a space within the Christian tradition from which to critique the church, Calvin must emphasize creation itself as the site to which the Word of God is primarily directed, the "very school of God's children."⁴³

In this way, I hope it is possible to glimpse how a careful study of providence's relation to the written disposition of Calvin's 1559 *Institutes* provide us with several intersecting resources for furthering the larger conversation around modernity, subjectivity, and theology—and, more specifically, how our political, social and ethical structures may continue to rely on a relationship between materiality and spirituality, immanence and transcendence. Calvin is not only concerned with harnessing strategies for reform, critique, and the reconstitution of selves within communities. He is also concerned with doing so precisely at the intersection of immanent life and the signs through which

⁴³ *Institutes*, 1.6.4.

we can better participate in the divine relationship to immanence. It is well known that the written scriptures play an important role for Calvin. What has remained less appreciated, however, is the extent to which Calvin always viewed the scriptures as directed toward the clarified reading of the world itself—not the ideal world, but this “fallen” world that is nevertheless capable of displaying the glory of the invisible God.

This activity, I will argue, is at the heart of Calvin’s doctrine of providence. In Calvin’s hands, this doctrine calls a Reformed Christian to receive the immanent creation as fundamentally affirmed, in its full created reality, by God, and then to learn to better “read” and engage it through participation in divine signification (that is, through both the faith of Christ and scripture). In this sense, scripture invites practices of reading, seeing, and training the affections. And providence, through which we are directed to understand our created selves in depth and detail as a reflection of God’s glory, secures the establishment of larger practices for instituting these activities—practices of reading, of sacramental participation, and ultimately of affirming and critical civic engagement. In reading creation with the lens of scripture and scripture through the lens of the incarnate Word, Calvin’s candidates of sacred theology are to learn what it means to be a proper citizen of the world, of the true church, and of the reformed city.

These practices are enabled, in part, by a repetition of reading, writing, and re-reading—activities which may serve as reminders of the difficulty of fully distinguishing (and thus dichotomizing) things like texts and bodies; knowing and action; theological doctrines and forms of practice; or the exercise of reading a historical text and reading our own situated selves. There is a certain delight, then, in appreciating the way Calvin closes the last preface of his final edition—the marks with which he symbolically and literally releases his physical grip from this nearly quarter-century project (see figure one).

fit difficile statuerē & quid potissimum quærere in Scriptura, & quem in scopum quicquid in ea continetur referre debeat. Itaque, hac veluti si rata via, si quas posthac Scripturæ enarrationes edidero, quia non necesse habebō de dogmatibus longas disputationes instituire, & in locos communes euagari: eas compendio semper astringam. Ea ratione, magna molestia & fastidio pius lector subleuabitur: modò præsentis operis cognitione, quasi necessario instrumento, præmunitus accedat. Sed quia huius instituti ratio in tot meis commētariis quasi in speculis clarè apparet, re ipsa malo declarare quale sit, quàm verbis prædicare. Vale amice Lector, & si quem ex meis laboribus fructum percipis, me precibus tuis apud Deum patrem nostrum adiuua.
Genevæ. Calend. Augusti. ANNO M. D. LIX.

Quos animus fuerat tenui excusare libello,
Discendi studio magnum fecere volumen.

Augustinus Epist. 7
Ego ex eorum numero me esse profiteor qui scribunt
proficiendo, & scribendo proficiunt.

Figure 1: John Calvin, *Institutio Christianae Religionis* (1559)

The penultimate signature appears as follows:

'Tis those whose cause my former booklet pled,
Whose zeal to learn has wrought this tome instead.⁴⁴

This rather playful couplet, though unaccredited, is apparently Calvin's; it has yet to be found in any text prior to the *Institutes*. Like the preface in its entirety, the couplet opens the boundaries of authorship

⁴⁴ *Institutes*, 5.

beyond the individual John Calvin to all of those whose interest elicits the act of continued writing. The ultimate signature then follows:

Augustine, Epistle 7

“I count myself one of the number of those who write as they learn and learn as they write.”⁴⁵

This line, misattributed as to the work but not the author, subsumes Calvin’s authorial project under the auspices of a beloved teacher. Augustine’s overwhelming influence on Calvin is amply apparent and often explicitly named. It will be further explored in this project. Like so many relationships, it is activated through the exercise of reading and writing. It is perhaps all too appropriate, then, that this final invocation of Augustine has little to do with the familiar Augustinian themes often so visible in Calvin’s work—themes of Christian teaching, grace, justification, theological anthropology, or predestination. Instead, Calvin closes his work by submitting to participation in an Augustinian *practice*—specifically, a practice of relating signs and things.

I hope, too, that the present exercise in reading and writing will foster learning—not only learning more about a figure whose legacy continues to mediate authority in our own time, but also learning about ourselves, our world, and a certain presence-in-absence of the divine other that might continue to occupy our ethics and our politics.

V. Outline

This project is structured as follows. In chapter one, I look at how providence has been discussed in recent scholarship, particularly within studies of the origins of modernity and arguments about secularization. I will focus on two particular trajectories: first, Weber’s argument concerning predestination, secularization, and the problem of meaning in modernity; and second, several conversations stemming from Carl Schmitt’s notion of political theology, which looks at providence and

⁴⁵ *Institutes*, 5.

related doctrines as symbolic models for organizing political life. Throughout, I will examine how providence is related to different notions of meaning, and the extent to which these varying notions of meaning rely on intention or on signification. I will also examine how these different authors use and deploy providence as a theological category.

In chapter two, I look at how providence functions within Platonic, Stoic, and early Christian texts. Here, I argue that providence is often been treated not merely as a speculative exercise, but as a form of argumentation responsive to concrete human concerns over the order of nature, the meaning of suffering, and the cultivation of the self in relation to the world, society, and God. This chapter therefore affirms and in some ways expands the general insight that has directed theories of secularization and political theology to providence. Specifically, I show that providence has long been a form of argumentation with ethical and political interests. I also assert that providence has not always, or even primarily, relied upon notions of divine intention. Rather, the discourse on providence that links a variety of ancient texts uses arguments to reorient and reorder a person's view of the world, preparing and acclimating her such that she is better able to face life's necessities, including suffering and death. I hope that these two opening chapters will provide helpful background against which to situate Calvin's arguments within a larger landscape of political, practical, and conceptual interests.

My final three chapters engage Calvin's writing, in a sense from the outside-in and then back out again. Chapter three approaches Calvin's 1559 *Institutes* as a pedagogical text, written at a particular historical time and location with precise strategies and aims. I look at the four-book structure and other generic features of the *Institutes*, arguing that Calvin's text manifests certain features of the classical and medieval genres of the *enchiridion* and the *itinerarium*. Attention to these two genres as forms of Christian teaching with particular aims offers a framework in which to begin to situate the work performed by Calvin's arguments about providence.

Chapter four then looks at how Calvin envisions particular doctrinal arguments to obtain in a pedagogical sense. If the *Institutes* is read as a deliberately-ordered sequence of doctrinal discussions, then this chapter will ask what Calvin sees as the particular means and goals of these doctrinal discussions. I proceed by giving a close reading of the opening chapters of the *Institutes* with the aim of understanding the relationship Calvin animates between knowledge, use, benefit, and piety. To contextualize Calvin's view of doctrinal pedagogy, I situate his writing alongside a reading of Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*, arguing that Calvin's writing re-inhabits Augustine's structure of teaching, albeit with some crucial differences. These differences signal the unique demands of a theology that, for Calvin, is both critical of the institutional church and interested in refashioning Christian selves who are prepared to participate as citizens of the earthly city.

Chapter five looks at the doctrine of providence (book one) in detail and then relates it to several theological discussions that follow across books two, three, and four. I begin by analyzing the mechanics of God's providential activity as presented by Calvin. I argue that Calvin's doctrine of providence not only asserts God's active willing activity in every area of immanent life, but that God wills primarily through works of grace that involve the ongoing affirmation of earthly intermediaries. This establishes a pattern of practice in which arguments about providence elicit a certain responsive and participatory activity on the part of the believer. This activity involves (a) affirming attention to the particularities of material life, including aspects that involve suffering and death; and (b) a practice of re-orienting oneself to this world and to God through an exercise of seeing and re-naming the world in accordance with the signifying lenses of the divine Word (the incarnation and scripture). This exercise of re-naming—of calling God "Creator" and "Father" and ourselves "glorious creatures" and "children" through Christ—performs God's original relationship to the world as the site of God's glory. I look at how the work of the reformed church as Calvin envisions it—particularly the practices of preaching and the sacraments—prepare and habituate human beings to participate in this divine providential activity.

Providence thus equips a person not only to become acclimated to life in relation to the divine order, but also prepares one to be a participant and leader in a reformed church and a reformed city.

In the conclusion, I connect my study of Calvin to the contemporary questions articulated in chapter one. I focus on the theological and political implications of Calvin's project of reform, exploring: (1) the critical force of his emphasis on providence within the sixteenth century context; (2) the precise sense in which providence relates to the sacraments and posits the sacramental presence of God in the world through the category of glory; and (3) the implications of the kind of affirmation we find in Calvin's writing on our understanding of ethical life, political projects of reform, and especially on the relation between political power and government.

Chapter One

Providence in Theories of Secularization and Political Theology

Providence can easily be portrayed as one of the more abstract of Christian theological doctrines, presenting an account of the world's causes and order that seems wildly disjunctive from everyday experience. In some accounts—not least those associated with the theology of Calvinism—providence involves a claim that the world and its inhabitants are *ultimately* organized and directed by God's will. If all worldly events occur under and through God's governance, then things that appear evil or random are nonetheless to be read as meaningful—even divinely ordained. When providence is conveyed in these terms, it often elicits doubt or discomfort over the implications of such a teaching on everyday human life. If God's will is the origin and end of all meaning, and if that will is enigmatic or hidden from human grasp, how is it possible for human beings to actually experience meaning? How can we hope to improve our lot, understand our purpose, or organize our societies? If everything happens only according to God's plan, what concrete resources are available for us to cultivate ethical selves, to perceive a course of action as just, or even to gain a sense of what it would mean to be a responsible citizen?

One logical outcome of providential teaching is that the world's events dim in importance. This world is seen as a trial, a merely intermediate stage scripted toward an end that will occur irrespective of particular human choices or efforts. The true meaning of life, then, would flow entirely from God's determined purpose—from what God intends the world's events to mean. Such a meaning would be bigger than any single actor and would run like a hidden current through earthly events and toward some hidden eschatological end.¹ The ethical outcome of this view would seem to splinter sharply: one

¹ The 1647 *Westminster Confession of Faith*, for example, offers a version of providence that is widely recognized as both institutionally and doctrinally central to the Christian Reformed tradition, but is quite different from the much longer and more complicated argument Calvin presents at the end of book one of the 1559 *Institutes*. There,

either adopts a posture of humble obedience to the perceived norms of that order or some position on a spectrum between dispassion and rebellion. Yet, it is not historically evident that this has been the most common structure or outcome of providential teaching; nor is it evident that those who have written some of the most influential arguments about providence intended or expected this reaction. In fact, as I will show, John Calvin not only presents a particularly adamant version of providence as the teaching that God wills all earthly events, but he also introduces his discussion of providence precisely by lauding the doctrine for its ability to bring tangible earthly comfort and even to motivate deliberate action on the part of human beings.

My overarching aim across the next five chapters will be to look at how providence operates multi-dimensionally within Calvin's 1559 *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Put another way, I am interested in how a view of providence that emphasizes the prerogative of divine transcendence can also function to shape complex ethical selves, to draw attention to earthly life as an end in itself, and even to provide resources for responsible citizenship. To begin, I will look both after and before Calvin's writing in order to get a better grasp of how the doctrine of providence has functioned as a prominent discourse² within Western thought.³ Specifically, I am interested in excavating certain deliberate ways in

providence is described as God's "decree" with respect to "all things that come to pass," and it is authorized entirely with reference to scripture. It is interesting to contrast this confession with the Geneva Catechism, written by Calvin in 1545. There, providence is treated as much more integrated with the life, experience, and spatial-temporal context of the believer.

² In using this term, I intentionally reference Foucault's well known use of the term as a network of references made stable and altered through performance. See, e.g., Michel Foucault, *Archeology of Knowledge* (UK: Routledge, 2002), 28-ff, 50-51. As will become clear, I am also interested in thinking about providence as a signature in the sense Giorgio Agamben uses the term. For Agamben, a signature is a concept that is mobilized across particular texts and contexts by material concerns. I will expand on the usefulness of understanding providence as a signature at the end of this chapter. For more, see Agamben's collection of essays, *The Signature of All Things* (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 2009), especially the second essay.

³ While I recognize that this is a fraught term (see my discussion in n.2 of the introduction), I employ "Western" as a commonplace shorthand. Here in particular, it denotes a stream of writings associated with Greek and Latin philosophy from approximately 500 BCE until 500 CE in which providence plays an important role. Some of these ideas would be adapted within medieval Christian thought, and some (particularly Stoic texts) were read as part of the classical resurgence of fifteenth and sixteenth-century humanism.

which providence is deployed toward both deeply personal and deeply political ends. I want to examine ways in which writings and arguments conceiving providence have, on the one hand, operated in an eminently practical domain, emerging from and responding to material human concerns over the meaning of life and particularly the meaning of suffering and death. On the other hand, I will look at providence as a precise way for human beings to conceive and implement forms of active ordering, both openly and discreetly shaping how human beings navigate and organize our earthly lives.

In chapter two, I will look at cases from the earlier historical canon concerning providence: Plato, Greek and Latin Stoicism, and early Christianity. By attending not only to the argumentative content of these texts but also to the wider practical and rhetorical features that structure their arguments within a larger field of persuasive force, I will argue that providence has long been a form of argument embedded in sets of practices aimed at cultivating and supporting attention to life and its necessities. But first, in this present chapter, I look at providence in its more recent written incarnation: as a topic of particular interest in recent secularization theory and political theology.

Providence also plays a prominent role in various important attempts to give an account of the origins of European modernity. For example, intellectual historian Amos Funkenstein has argued that belief in providence cultivates a kind of attention to the natural order that underwrites the development of scientific methodologies in the seventeenth century. He argues, similarly, that providence, coupled with theories of divine accommodation, led historians to see history as a series of contextual periods following a divinely-directed teleological development and thus to the modern philosophy of history as a narrative of progress.⁴ Others, some of whom will receive more extended treatment in the course of this chapter, have linked providential thinking to modern faith in democratic institutions and a general

⁴ These first two are perhaps best articulated by Amos Funkenstein in *Theology and the Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986).

faith in proceduralism and the market economy.⁵ As a scholar of theology, I find this literature interesting in part for its interest in re-reading theological texts in a way that is responsive to present concerns over modern political and social practices, notions of self, and the intellectual assumptions that undergird both.

Attention to these conversations thus recasts questions of historical theology and the relationship between constructive theology and religious practice. That is, these arguments about providence and secularization alert subjects of the modern West that our interest in re-reading formative theological texts has something deeply to do with our understanding of who we are, the values we take for granted, and the system of practices that our daily lives continue to repeat. Re-reading the writings that in some way may have helped to shape these practices thus becomes a way of re-reading ourselves and our present. Yet, modernity is not one thing, and neither is the doctrine of providence. Modernity has treated questions of meaning and order in different ways, and theologians have argued for the relationship between the divine will and immanent order in different ways. Part of my goal in this current chapter is thus to look at some of what I take to be the more interesting readings of providence in relation to questions of modern meaning and social organization. I hope that this effort will allow for a more nuanced and insightful reading of what is at stake in different kinds of providential arguments and in how one approaches the impact of theological writing.

These authors who posit some connection between providence and modern life view this connection in vastly different ways. For some, the relationship between theology and modern life is largely subtractive: as the study of the natural order began to reap its own rewards, increasing scientific advancement and prosperity gradually led to a reduction of interest in *God* and an increasing interest in

⁵ For versions of these arguments—all of which I will examine at in this chapter—see Marcel Gauchet in *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Weber's classic (though highly criticized) argument in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells (New York: Penguin, 2002); the aforementioned work by Funkenstein; and most recently by Giorgio Agamben in *The Kingdom and the Glory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

developing better methods for taking mastery over the *world*.⁶ For others, however, providence is subtracted from modern consciousness, but leaves a modern subject unable to coherently account for the source of meaning. Karl Löwith, for example, argues in the mid-twentieth century that the “loss” of providence creates a hole that remains perniciously unfilled, generating a crisis of meaning that subverts any modern claim toward “progress.”⁷ In contrast, several contemporary continental philosophers argue that theological ideas and narratives retain a positive role in the symbolic imagination that continues to inform our political and social life—even if one registers certain doubts about the modern relevance of religious *belief*.⁸ Within these varying accounts, a doctrine such as providence is not subtracted as much as it is internalized within both the subject and the forms of political and social life that produce subjects. For all of these accounts, understanding the most influential doctrines of providence will shed crucial light on how we now think, move, and interact with the natural world and with other people.

This chapter will consist of three sections. In the first, I provide a more extensive background for the role that providence has played and continues to play in scholarship on modernity, secularization theory and political theology. In the second, I look more closely at Max Weber’s classic secularization thesis and the emphasis it places on the role of Calvinist predestination as a doctrine that cultivates a particular kind of orientation toward the world, cultivating values of acquisition and organization

⁶ Hans Blumenberg’s *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983) is probably the most famous example of this kind of argument, although a less nuanced version of this kind of argument is taken for granted in much of the writing associated with the new atheism.

⁷ The most relevant examples of this view which I will discuss in this chapter are Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*; and “Science as Vocation,” in *Essays in Sociology*, ed. and trans. by H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946), 129-56; and Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949).

⁸ The most relevant examples of this view which I will discuss in this chapter are Claude Lefort, “The Permanence of the Theologico-Political?” in *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans. David Macey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 213–55; Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); and Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011); and *The Signature of All Things* (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 2009).

through rationalization. In particular, I pay attention to the relationship between Weber's thesis in *The Protestant Ethic* and his other writings in which he exhibits concern over the problem of the source of meaning, particularly in relation to suffering, in modernity.

Finally, in the third section, I look at two different attempts to relate theology to contemporary political life, the logic of modern governance, and the ethics of citizenship. First, Marcel Gauchet offers a secularization thesis that posits the reduction of religion in modernity but argues for the continuing importance of negotiating transcendence. Gauchet's argument is interesting insofar as he relates strong theological articulations of divine transcendence—especially those forwarded during the early Protestant Reforms in the doctrine of providence—to increased activity on the part of human beings. For Gauchet, the more distant and powerful God becomes, the more God becomes a being to whom human beings are discursively and rationally responsive. He argues that this transcendence ultimately becomes incarnated in other human beings and underwrites the logic of democratic institutions designed to engender political responsibility.⁹ If Gauchet enables a reader to think more critically and creatively about the functional effects on the human subject that come from thinking about divine transcendence, Giorgio Agamben's recent work on providence and governmentality helps one to think through the aesthetic and materialized effects of theology that Gauchet's account overlooks. In *The Kingdom and the Glory* (2011), Agamben draws attention not only to the symbolic role of providence in organizing the modern political imagination, but also to the repetitive and performative features of providence that he finds deeply analogical to the operation of contemporary governmental power.¹⁰

⁹ Shortly, I critique Gauchet's disavowal of elements of "religious" practice and participation that I argue remain inscribed within his account of modern politics. This critique will lead me ultimately to consider the relationship between theology, practice, participation, and the role of the aesthetic in modernity.

¹⁰ Agamben's account differs from Gauchet in several respects. For one, it approaches theological writing with more interest in the particularity of arguments and the effects of writing itself rather than more abstract symbolism. Additionally, and related to this, Agamben gives more attention to the role of non-rational collective practices in enacting patterns of governmentality.

By looking closely at these three authors—Weber, Gauchet, and Agamben—along with their relevant interlocutors, I will collect some important interpretive motifs, or lines of questioning that will later help illumine some facets of Calvin’s doctrine of providence and its ethical and political effects. These will include the following: (1) the relationship of providence to the structure of meaning; (2) the relation of theology more generally to the wider social symbolic that organizes a society’s collective political and ethical imagination; and (3) the relationship between providence and patterns of practice that organize a society’s collective patterns of action. Let me unpack these briefly. When providence is figured as a unilateral determination of an end on the part of the divine will, meaning seems to lie in that will’s intention; an event has meaning inasmuch as God intends that meaning. If providence is figured as a divine activity of ordering and guiding, however, then another possible sense of meaning obtains, one in which meaning emerges from the arrangement of things rather than from intention. By looking in particular at Weber’s understanding of meaning in modernity, I hope to begin to construct a more precise way to approach the multiple ways in which providence can organize forms of individual and social meaning.

The suggestion that theology plays an important role in shaping the social symbolic irrespective of belief is an insight common to theories of secularization. Whether or not scholars agree as to how the realm of the symbolic shapes material life, and whether or not they agree that theology plays a reduced or ongoing role, they tend to agree at least implicitly that the relationship between theology and modernity is worth exploring. Theology, among other things, is a discourse that figures the world and assigns different forms of value to different things; an understanding of premodern theological arguments therefore proves illuminative to the metaphysical and epistemological assumptions negotiated in a contemporary “social imaginary.”¹¹ Yet it is not enough to stop with the question of how

¹¹ This is Charles Taylor’s term, which operates similarly to Foucault’s discourse. In *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), Taylor writes that “The social imaginary is not a set of ideas; rather, it

theological ideas contribute to a more general symbolic imaginary. This is why the third line of inquiry is necessary. I will therefore continue to pursue the variety of ways these ideas are not only enacted through material and bodily practices, but also how certain ideas are disposed or animated by particular material circumstances on both personal and collective levels.

Ultimately, I anticipate that these three questions will connect a reading of Calvin to a broader set of literature and draw attention to dimensions of traditional theological writing that are easily overlooked.¹² If continental philosophers and secularization theorists find it valuable to mine the Christian theological canon in order to better understand deeply embedded values and forms of practice that continue to shape contemporary secular society, then it behooves theologians to also attend to the way theological writing and speaking always carries broad social and ethical repercussions. This means honing methods that allow readers to become attentive to the material contexts of theological writing and reading in order to be able to grasp the particular kinds of concerns that elicit and orient certain kinds of theological arguments. It means paying attention to the way arguments are integrated with established rituals and more subtle forms of repetitive bodily practice. And, finally, it means honing our understanding of *how* theology—as writing, as narrative, as an aesthetic enterprise—is able to bring about and reshape these various relationships between mind, body, sense, and collective life.

At the end of this chapter and at various times throughout, I will devote special attention to the importance of attending to the significance of reading and writing in disposing different kinds of arguments about providence and shaping the way these arguments relate to the world in a wider sense. If providence is fundamentally a discourse concerned with organizing the world in relation to a

is what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society” (2). In this book, Taylor traces the novelty as well as the multiplicity of the social imaginaries that shape basic assumptions and practices in the modern West.

¹² In my view, theology is too often read as an arcane discourse perpetuated by insiders in a tradition for insiders in a tradition. I hope my work calls these kinds of boundaries into question, showing that inasmuch as theology addresses concerns that shape and dispose individual and collective life, it calls into question any stable boundary between insiders and outsiders.

transcendent reality that escapes and overwhelms us, it is also about the strategies and tactics that human beings use to figure, respond to, and enact those claims and stories toward the end of shaping a life on earth that is more courageous, hopeful, and responsible. With these overarching and intersecting aims in mind, I will now sketch out a more detailed background of providence, secularization theory, and political theology.

I. Background: A Sketch of an Interdisciplinary Conversation

In 2011, a brief reflection appeared in the journal *Church History* by historian of American religion Amanda Porterfield titled “Leaving Providence Behind.”¹³ Porterfield surveys the three essays that comprised the inaugural issue of the journal in 1932, emerging during a time of particular uncertainty and upheaval in America and Europe alike: early in the wake of the Great Depression; retrospectively situated between two catastrophic world wars; rising anxieties over communism and fascism on both sides of the Atlantic. Perhaps in direct response to this turmoil, Porterfield writes that each essay displays “a bracing faith in the providential course of history,” one that seemed to fund a wide-ranging facility with historical events and primary sources organized with “narrative flair” and “ebullience.”¹⁴ The essays cover disparate topics—efforts at Christian unity in the years after the American Civil War, the humanitarian arc of Christian attitudes toward sin as evidenced in 11th century Irish manuals of penance, and early efforts at separating church and state among sixteenth century Anabaptists. In spite of their diversity, however, each of these 1932 essays maintains confidence that history is divinely guided toward definitive progress. In the words of Albert C. Outler, church history

¹³ Amanda Porterfield, “Leaving Providence Behind,” in *Church History* 80:2 (2011): 366-368.

¹⁴ Porterfield, 366.

ought to be undergirded by “the historians’ obligation to rehearse the past in light of the Christian worldview.”¹⁵

Yet Outler’s claim appears in a 1965 *Church History* essay written in part to chart the very disappearance of this providential paradigm.¹⁶ Thirty-three years after the 1932 inaugural issue would offer a set of arguments structured unquestioningly by providential expectation, Outler wrote that “The notion of ‘providence’ has simply dropped beneath the mental horizon of modern historiography.”¹⁷ Outler thus expresses a view shared by many of his contemporaries and one that may even seem common-sensical to many who live in the historical wake of the twentieth century: history is marked by accidents that have no *logos*—no fixed order or apparent purpose.¹⁸

While for Outler this recognition did not relieve the burden of the Christian historian to provide a narration of the past according to the expectation of divine guidance—Outler writes that Christian historians must learn to narrate history precisely out of the experience of crisis—many subsequent contributors to the journal would find themselves relieved of such a burden. Porterfield observes,

Forty-plus years after Outler, the editors of *Church History* continue to receive manuscripts that carry this kind of theological burden. But we also receive an increasing number of manuscripts that do not reflect a providential, Christian worldview or seek redemptive meaning in events of the past.... if that faith of providence evident in the journal in 1932 had dropped beneath the mental horizon for some contributors by 1965, we might ask if many of the historians who write for the journal today are not living in entirely different orbits.¹⁹

She gestures, however, to the irony that both Outler’s “apophatic” approach to providence and more recent historians’ disavowal of providence remain tied to the legacy of a journal founded under the

¹⁵ Porterfield, 367.

¹⁶ Albert C. Outler, “Theodosius’ Horse: Reflections on the Predicament of the Church Historian,” in *Church History* 34 (1965): 251-61.

¹⁷ Porterfield, 368.

¹⁸ Porterfield, 368.

¹⁹ Porterfield, 368.

auspices of providence—under some kind of expectation that studying and narrating human contexts of the past is a meaningful and useful enterprise.

The apparent decline of a legible providential paradigm structuring Christian historical consciousness is similarly evident in other sectors of society. The term has grown scarce in evangelical and mainline churches alike. Furthermore, if we take Porterfield's survey of *Church History* from 1932 to 1965 to 2011 as any kind of metric, the decline of providence within overtly Christian discourses is an event that happened relatively late within a larger trend. According to Iain Wilkinson, the ordering and meaning-making function of providence began to decline centuries earlier as subjects of the Enlightenment began to look toward immanent life and human activity as the primary sphere and source of meaningful activity. Wilkinson writes that

A once popular understanding of pain and suffering as components of Divine Providence and as instruments of God's instruction and grace is now held to be both intellectually incredible and morally unacceptable. In modern societies pain and suffering are generally taken to be morally undesirable and are regarded as elements of human experience that, where possible, should be minimized or eliminated.²⁰

If providence began to decline in view of several widely-accepted tenets of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment philosophy—especially those that emphasize the importance of worldly human activity and the use of reason to master and improve the world—then the visible decline of providence within Christian thought came late in a long process of what many would call secularization. It is one of history's ironies, then, that precisely when interest in traditional views of providence would seem to have dropped out of Christian thought, providence would become a prominent category in the rising discourse of secularization theory.

²⁰ Iain Wilkinson, "The problem of suffering as a driving force of rationalization and social change," in *The British Journal of Sociology* Volume 64 Issue 1 (2013): 126.

a. Secularization Theory

This observation, on its face, fits the form of what has become known in recent decades as the subtractive theory of secularization. That is, it suggests that the modern West is a product of the gradual turn toward immanent life coupled with the gradual subtracting of transcendent elements associated with a religious and otherworldly past.²¹ While the term “secular” has widely come to connote the absence of religion—that is, a secular state or a secular university is one free of religious subservience or even any religious influence—“secular” remains a term with a religious origin and one that continues to carry a certain ambivalence with respect to religion.²² The Latin word *saeculum* means “century” or “age,” and within Christian thought comes to signify the temporal frame of worldly activity between the first and second coming of Christ. The term was further used to distinguish clergy who were not part of a religious order; *secular* clergy worked in the world, serving in parishes.²³ Following the sixteenth century reforms, *secularization* was first used to refer to the process by which church property, such as monasteries, came under the control of the state.²⁴

The ambiguity inscribed in the historical use of “secular”—as both related *to* and exclusive *of* religion—continues to haunt the theoretical discourse that began in the mid-nineteenth-century as an attempt to characterize the ongoing process of secularization in the modern West.²⁵ The subtraction

²¹ Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age* describes these sorts of theories as “subtraction stories,” describing them as follows: “stories of modernity in general, and secularity in particular, which explain them by human beings having lost, or sloughed off, or liberated themselves from earlier, confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations of knowledge” (22). Taylor critiques the movements of reform for contributing to this process by (unwittingly) contributing to a trend of never-ending reform that would drive a process of disenchantment. See pp. 61-2, 77-ff.

²² Funkenstein offers a helpful background on the term “secular.” See pp. 3-9.

²³ See Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (eds.), *Rethinking Secularism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 9.

²⁴ David Biale, *Not in the Heavens, The Tradition of Jewish Secular Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 3.

²⁵ It is important to note that my discussion refers exclusively to secularization *theory* rather than the empirical study of secularization. Empirically, Western Europe and America yield very different data in terms of the reduction of church attendance and the influence of religion on public life. Moreover, global data solidly overturns

theory emerges early and is perhaps best exemplified by Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Max Weber (1864-1920). Both authors' theories of secularization are more complicated, as we will see shortly, than the term "subtraction" might suggest. Yet both give an account of history and modernity that coincides with idea that religious belief is in a gradual state of decline. For Marx, history gradually pulls away the religious veils that mystify the fundamentally material conditions of the exploitation of labor so that they may be transformed. Weber holds a less progressive view in which the modern turn toward the rationalization of the world leads to the pursuit of mastery over the world through mechanization and technology; this drives the gradual "disenchantment" of the world, or the elimination of non-rationalistic values and sources for meaning. Crucially for both Marx and Weber, providence is one of the beliefs that becomes subtracted. For Marx, this is because the idealism of providential thinking is one of the veils that mystifies the material conditions of labor. For Weber, anxiety over providence elicits precisely the turning toward the mastery of the world by human actors.

There is another prominent stream of secularization theory, however, that is not a narrative of subtraction as much as one of transference; here the doctrine of providence assumes a more complicated role. Karl Löwith's *Meaning in History* (1949) is an important touchstone for this trajectory. Löwith observes that providence, as a claim about the relation of the divine will to earthly affairs, historically functions to organize human relations to historical events. Providence gives life's events a meaning irreducible to the ambiguity of the events themselves. He contends that the transition from a paradigm of providence to one of progressive philosophy of history in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—especially in figures such as Hegel and Marx—led to a crisis of meaning: modernity can no longer account for its methods on its own terms. Because historical meaning is no longer established by

the subtractionary secularization thesis, showing an increase of religious participation in almost every region except for Western Europe. See, for example, R. J. Barro and R. M. McCleary, "Religion and Economic Growth across Countries," in *American Sociological Review* 68 (2003): 760-781; and "Which Countries Have State Religions?," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 120(4) (2005): 1331-1370.

way of an external reference point (God), but was sought in the unfolding order of earthly events themselves through methods of historical study, history retains an expectation of order and fulfillment without maintaining a framework in which such an expectation would be coherent. Löwith elaborates his critique:

It is not by chance that we use the words “meaning” and “purpose” interchangeably, for it is mainly purpose which constitutes meaning for us. The meaning of all things that are what they are, not by nature, but because they have been created either by God or by man, depends on purpose. A chair has its meaning of being a “chair,” in the fact that it indicates something beyond its material nature: the purpose of being used as a seat.... If we abstract from a chair its transcendent purpose, it becomes a meaningless combination of pieces of wood. The same is true in regard to the formal structure of the meaning of history. History, too, is meaningful only by indicating some transcendent purpose beyond the actual facts.²⁶

Löwith argues therefore that the nature of the shift from providence to philosophy of history, as an attempt to provide or account for meaning, reduces the meaning-granting reference point to the world itself. “The problem of history as a whole,” he concludes, “is unanswerable within its own perspective. Historical processes as such do not bear the least evidence of a comprehensive and ultimate meaning. History as such has no outcome. There never has been and never will be an immanent solution to the problem of history.”²⁷ Löwith’s argument is therefore that the structure of meaning given by providence is never truly rejected. Rather, in the shift from a theological notion of providence to the philosophy of history within a strictly immanent frame, the structure of meaning remains but becomes denatured. The structure of providence, on this account, began to shift in terms of its location (from primary/otherworldly to secondary/worldly causation) and its accessibility (from an object of transcendent faith to an object of immanent knowledge). In other words, Löwith assumes a structure of meaning that relies on a relationship between transcendent intention concerning and order immanent matter in order to obtain. Thus, when the origin of meaning is transferred to matter, the structure

²⁶ Löwith, 5.

²⁷ Löwith, 191.

collapses: the function of providence remains stunted as long as it is sought in precisely the site, for Löwith, is devoid of meaning: the material world.

Löwith's argument has come under criticism, particularly from Hans Blumenberg. His *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (1963), written in part as a direct response to Löwith, argues that modern historiographical (and, he argues, scientific) methods arose not out of an illicit transference of, but rather a reoccupation of earlier theological ideas that had collapsed into contradiction.²⁸ Tensions inherent in the theological ideas—ideas such as providence and Christian eschatology—rendered them incapable of satisfactorily signifying a world fit for human life. Modern, secular methods of historiography, science, and technological development do not operate in continuity with theological ideas, but rather address the fundamental questions of human life in a fundamentally different way. Still, Blumenberg must allow that the theological past decisively impacts modernity, even if in a negative sense, inasmuch as its traces remain in the kinds of questions and interests that drive the range of characteristically modern enterprises. To the extent that Blumenberg's argument does not acknowledge the structural resonance of modern questions with their theological precursors, it too has come under much recent criticism.²⁹

I will not focus on this debate here except to note certain ways in which the disagreement between Löwith and Blumenberg shapes the conversation on secularization such that interest in the relationship between theological doctrines (especially providence) and modernity would gain

²⁸ See Blumenberg, 49, 60, 77, 466.

²⁹ One of the most important objections to Blumenberg comes from Hans Jonas, who is particularly critical of Blumenberg's claim that modernity represents an overcoming of the Gnostic tendency in Christianity. Jonas argues that the characteristic modern posture of mastery over nature bears certain structural resonances to the phenomenon Blumenberg calls Gnosticism. For a helpful discussion of this, see Benjamin Lazier, "Overcoming Gnosticism: Hans Jonas, Hans Blumenberg, and the Legitimacy of the Natural World," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 64:4 (October 2003). Michael Gillespie's introduction to *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008) as well as Agamben's *The Signature of All Things* (p. 71) similarly contain critiques of Blumenberg.

momentum.³⁰ For many after Löwith and Blumenberg, it is no longer plausible to posit the simple subtraction of theology from the modern imaginary; the question would shift to how to best characterize the relationship between theological and secular forms of thought. Thus, efforts to account for the shape and ground methods of historiography, scientific research, and macroeconomics from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries would lead to interest in more complicated articulations of providence.³¹

Amos Funkenstein's *Theology and the Scientific Imagination* (1986), for example, offers an intriguing account of providence as not merely an object that undergoes a surreptitious process of secularization, but as rather a form of argumentation that became variously deployed to figure and refigure the human ability to grasp the order of the world.³² If modernity secularized theological ideas by implementing their conceptual structure within an immanent frame or for the purposes of ordering rationalized methodologies, it also explicitly *re-introduced* "secular theological"³³ ideas to fund these new and productive approaches to attaining knowledge and reordering life. Funkenstein cites the example of Giambattista Vico, who contributed to the development of contextual history, but did so by explicitly reintroducing the category of providence: "Vico [could] reintroduce providence into history

³⁰ If, on the other hand, Blumenberg's work had been wholly persuasive, one might have expected this conversation to lose momentum.

³¹ Funkenstein's work is the best example of an extended effort to relate the complexity of premodern and early modern theological writings to these features of modernity.

³² While Funkenstein does not offer as strong an argument for the false consciousness of modernity, he similarly and more carefully questions whether historical accounts can be written without animating a kind of recourse to providential notions of meaning. See, for example, 206-209. For his argument on the secularization of providence, see all of chapter four: "Divine Providence and the Course of History," pp. 202-289; see especially 213-215, 276-279, 282-289.

³³ Funkenstein posits a notion of secular theology as a theology that was oriented toward the world, *ad seculum*. He argues that particularly during the seventeenth century—not in the same way before, and certainly not after—science, philosophy, and theology were seen as once and the same discipline. He distinguishes this from the more common notion of *theologia naturalis* inasmuch as "secular theology" makes ample use of dogmatic commitments for the purposes of immanent investigations. See Funkenstein, 3-9.

and thus resume, on a richer base, a tradition of Christian philosophy of history going back to Irenaeus of Lyons, seeking to establish the correspondence between the divine plan of salvation and the immanent nature of [human beings].”³⁴ The introduction of new methodologies, on this reading, is always a negotiation between conventional ways of signifying the nature of the world and productive ways of altering those conventions.³⁵

b. Schmittian Political Theology

It is here that the intellectual-historical trajectory of secularization theory begins to collide conceptually with another strand of discourse on theology and modernity, namely the articulated form of political theology that is often traced to the writing of Carl Schmitt (1888-1985).³⁶ Schmitt’s account of political theology effectively connects the discourse on secularization to the organization of the modern political order. If Löwith was concerned that modern philosophy of history was unable to justify its claims to meaning and progress in purely immanent terms, Schmitt has similar concerns about the viability of democracy in the absence of a transcendent referent. Marcel Gauchet, who I will discuss later in this chapter, would later phrase this paradox as follows: “The more we are led to acknowledge a universal validity to the principles of Western modernity, the less we are able to ground them in a

³⁴ Funkenstein, 288.

³⁵ Unlike Löwith, Funkenstein does not suggest that this is an illegitimate transference of some fixed relation between transcendence and immanence within an immanent frame. Instead, Funkenstein’s assessment of the relationship between Christianity suggests a more complicated understanding of the work performed by doctrinal arguments not only in modernity but in premodernity. See, especially, p. 357.

³⁶ The term “political theology” also refers to the branch of theology that is interested in addressing matters of political light that are guided by traditional or confessional theology. For some discussions of this form of political theology, see Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan (eds.), *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World* (New York: Fordham, 2006); Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, “Political Theology and the Critique of Modernity,” *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory* No. 10 (2005): 87-106; William T. Cavanaugh, Jeffrey W. Bailly and Craig Hovey (eds.), *An Eerdmans Reader in Contemporary Political Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012).

history of progress of which they represent the fulfillment.”³⁷ In other words, if democracy is grounded on the rational outcome of historical tensions, it cannot be treated *a priori* as a universally valid form of government. But without an argument that democracy is universally valid, it becomes difficult to justify its historical character. This observation dovetails with the views of a range of authors—Weber included—who see the apparent lack of a unified source for meaning in modernity as an urgent problem. If one finds neither belief in a providential order nor a determinant version of Marxist materialism to be wholly persuasive, then it becomes more important to focus one’s attention on the relationship between the conceptual and performative force of language and our ability to perceive and engage materiality.

Along these lines, Schmitt’s *Political Theology* (1922) posits an ongoing analogy between theological concepts and the immanent structure of politics, famously writing that “all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts not only because of their historical development—in which they were transferred from theology to the theory of the state, whereby, for example, the omnipotent God became the omnipotent lawgiver—but also because of their systematic structure.”³⁸ Where Marx had posited the gradual subtraction of theological veils from a materialist substructure, Schmitt asserts the constitutive continuation of theological symbolic mediation at the heart of modern political operations.

Thus for Schmitt, political sovereignty—including its democratic form—relies not principally on proceduralism, but fundamentally upon the primacy of the decision made by the sovereign. There is a fundamental analogy, therefore, between the political structure and the structure of the world

³⁷ Marcel Gauchet, *Le Débat* 50 (May-August 1988): 168; Quoted in Breckman, 6.

³⁸ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. Schwab (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 36.

established in the biblical account as *creatio ex nihilo*. This provides the unity of meaning underlying political life. In the words of György Geréby,

The decision [undergirding] the law is analogous to the *creatio ex nihilo* [creation from nothing]. The lawgiver is analogous to the omnipotent deity. The state of emergency, the conceptual case, corresponds to the concept of the miracle. Schmitt's claim is that, secularization notwithstanding, the conceptual framework of a world, even if deprived of the divine, still shows a "theological" structure.... In the same way, the idea of utopia is the secularized version of paradise.³⁹

For Schmitt, however, this correspondence does not necessarily suggest the primacy of the theological; rather, it suggests that a certain social symbolism persists within an immanent frame as it did previously within a transcendent frame.

Although I will not primarily be looking at Schmitt's work, it is important to name his founding contribution to this strand of political theology for two reasons. First, the arguments I will be looking at occur against a backdrop largely shaped by his contributions alongside those of Marx and Weber. Second, Schmitt's theory returns us, obliquely, to the relevance of providence—a doctrine within Christian thought that functions as an elaboration of creation while also being a concretization of (divine) sovereign activity. We will see when looking at Agamben that Schmitt did not elaborate on the significance of providence as an immanent economy; nor, for that matter, was he concerned with the other effects of providential discourse that Löwith and Funkenstein name, such as the philosophy of history and the scientific method. But Schmitt does direct our attention to the decree itself, to the irrationality (or perhaps superrationality) of the decision that anchors and foregrounds the possibility of a subsequent providential or procedural system. And inasmuch as Calvin's theological project is also an intellectual contribution to a concrete project of reform, the question of sovereignty and social order never lurks far.

³⁹ György Geréby, "Political Theology versus Theological Politics: Erik Peterson and Carl Schmitt," in *New German Critique*, No. 105, Political Theology (Fall, 2008): 11.

Finally, Schmitt's argument is an occasion for one last methodological observation inasmuch as it is vulnerable to criticism for relying on one particular, and moreover a particularly *recent* theological conception of divine sovereignty. In general, many of the theorists discussed in this chapter, with the possible exception of Agamben, tend to treat theological doctrines as if they were neatly fixed orthodoxies instead of arguments that emerged from the complicated and fraught negotiations of complex tradition. Furthermore, emphasis has been placed on very particular early modern theologies of sovereignty. The notion of a Christian God who transcends the world and directs its meaning from beyond—a description resonant not only with the image of God employed by Schmitt, but also by Löwith and Weber—echoes the God of nominalism, a school of scholastic thought that emerged most prominently during the fourteenth century and is most closely associated with William of Ockham.⁴⁰ This particular kind of sovereignty is furthermore resonant with the God of Karl Barth's crisis theology in his *Epistle to the Romans*, editions of which were being released contemporaneously with Schmitt's *Political Theology*.⁴¹

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that this was the only doctrine of God operative in mainstream Christian theology during this time, much less since the fourteenth century; and if the overarching methods of political theology are worthwhile, it behooves us to take a closer look at the wider range of influential theological articulations of doctrines such as providence⁴² in order to consider their political import. This is part of the motivation for looking so closely at Calvin's *particular* doctrine

⁴⁰ For a more extended treatment of Ockham's nominalism, see Marilyn McCord Adams, "Ockham's Nominalism and Unreal Entities," in *Philosophical Review* 86 (2) (1977): 144-76. For a discussion of nominalism's impact on modernity, see Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity*.

⁴¹ Barth, *Epistle to the Romans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968). *Der Römerbrief* was originally published in 1919.

⁴² Here, I intentionally shift from "sovereignty" to "providence" because arguments about sovereignty emerge in the larger set of issues—God's power and will in relation to the world—that have been treated much more commonly under the auspices of creation and providence.

of providence in its complex, written disposition. But for now, I will look more closely at some of these theorists themselves.

II. Predestination, Immanence, and the Significance of a Life: Weber and his Interlocutors

One of the earliest and perhaps most literal attempts to link the teaching of providence to the unique orientation of modernity is Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Weber makes this basic connection between the propositional content associated with the doctrine—chiefly in its more specific form of predestination⁴³—and its impact on patterns of living more generally. Additionally, Weber's argument is especially salient because it is one of the few (and also the most influential) that refers specifically to the impact of Calvinism on modern life. His often-repeated thesis claims that there exists an “elective affinity” between Calvinist societies and conditions favorable to modern capitalism. This mutual attraction is rooted in two factors: an emphasis on the merit of earthly labor coupled with a fundamentally ascetic orientation toward worldly life.⁴⁴ Weber provides a quasi-historical narrative for this particular affinity,⁴⁵ suggesting that there was, particularly among English Calvinist congregations, a marked anxiety concerning the certainty of election or the status of the individual's salvation with respect to God's decree. In response to this anxiety, pastors encouraged their congregants to look for signs of their election in earthly blessings, thus establishing a link between God's decrees and the fruit of earthly labor. This, for Weber, was a crucial step toward the

⁴³ Predestination is related to providence in that it concerns the same questions—the relation of divine power, will, and goodness to creation. Providence, because it deals with creation in a wider sense, particularly addresses questions of care and governance. Predestination deals particularly with questions of human salvation. In Calvin's *Institutes*, providence concludes book one (“The Knowledge of God the Creator”) while election comes near the conclusion of book three (“The Way in Which We Receive the Grace of Christ, What Benefits Come to Us From It, and What Effects Follow”).

⁴⁴ See Weber, 6-7, 30, 36.

⁴⁵ It is important to note, as Weber does, that there is never anything more than an “affinity” and that a range of other causal factors are necessary to give an adequate account of the rise of capitalism—or any other modern forms of rationalization.

rationalization of religion that coincided with a modern trend toward the rationalization of all areas of life (economic, political, academic)—a rationalization that, in Weber’s narrative, would eventually become inescapable. Weber would refer to this gradual, subtractionary process as one of disenchantment, the steady substitution of one’s belief in intentional causes with causes that are purely mechanistic.⁴⁶

This thesis has come under criticism over the years from a number of different angles. Some scholars have been able to construct alternate historical accounts for the rise of capitalism in non-Calvinist lands.⁴⁷ Others have provided evidence that a wide range of Christian sects manifest the relationship Weber emphasizes between acquisitiveness and spiritual asceticism, even those who disavow predestination.⁴⁸ And still others have criticized Weber’s thesis on the grounds of historical theology, arguing that the connection between predestination and an orientation toward earthly work is not empirically evident within the Calvinist communities Weber names.⁴⁹ Still, Weber’s thesis has remained resilient. In one respect, this resilience may be due to the fact that Weber’s argument, read closely, anticipates some of these objections. For example, he consistently maintains the distinction between Calvin’s teaching, and even Reformed orthodoxy, and the later tendency to link anxiety over salvation with earthly happiness. Similarly, in his historical account, he never claims more than an “affinity” between Calvinism and capitalism, thus leaving space for a range of other key causal factors to explain the rise of capitalism.

⁴⁶ See, for example, Weber, 82, 126. See also Steven Seidman, “Modernity, Meaning, and Cultural Pessimism in Max Weber,” *Sociological Analysis* 44:4. (1983): 269-70.

⁴⁷ See, for example, Jane Gleeson-White, *Double Entry: How the Merchants of Venice Created Modern Finance* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2012).

⁴⁸ Phillip Gorski, *The Disciplinary Revolution: Calvinism and the Rise of the State in Early Modern Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 26, 178n.81.

⁴⁹ See Malcolm H. MacKinnon, “Part I: Calvinism and the Infallible Assurance of Grace: The Weber Thesis Reconsidered,” *The British Journal of Sociology* 39:2 (Jun., 1988): 143-77. MacKinnon argues that there was a shift away from predestination toward covenant theology among the English Calvinists on whom Weber’s argument relies.

If anything, then, it may be that Weber's *Protestant Ethic* is not *wrong* as much as it is dangerously vague. Its claim about Calvinist teaching is too general—not concretely connected to either a compelling body of literature or to wide-ranging sociological data, and thus not capable of falsification. Yet it persists because there remains some obvious sense in which Weber was on to *something*—something easily intuited or even common-sensical, apparent from a simple glance at the relationship between Calvinist Protestants and a certain trajectory toward financial exchange, industrialization, and organized statehood in places like Switzerland, the Netherlands, and New England.

Philip Gorski's recent work offers an interesting example of one attempt to return to Weber's insight and state its argument differently. In *The Disciplinary Revolution: Calvinism and the Rise of the State in Early Modern Europe*, Gorski articulates two ways in which Weber's thesis can be redirected to account for some obvious affinity between certain loci of distinctly modern society and Calvinism. He argues, first, that it is not so much predestination but rather the infrastructure of discipline, established within Calvinist societies, that plays a crucial role in the formation of modern society; and second, that capitalism is not the best touchstone for understanding the impact of discipline. Instead, he looks to the operation of the modern state.

Drawing from Foucault's work, in which he argues that pastoral power emanates from the bottom-up and becomes constitutive of governmentality, Gorski examines the rise of disciplinary procedures both at the micro-level of Calvinist church polity and in broader attempts by Calvinists to reform society. Gorski's methods are largely empirical; yet he offers several suggestions that contribute to the conceptual questions relevant to my work. For one, he emphasizes the social character of Calvinism. This is something that Weber also emphasizes, namely that "the Calvinists... were not content with a disciplined church; they wanted a disciplined society as well."⁵⁰ This manifested

⁵⁰ Gorski, *DR*, 27. He notes that this point is made by Weber in *The Protestant Ethic*, though overshadowed by the larger emphasis on the human reaction to strong predestination. While this cannot be strictly associated with

concretely in organized projects of poor relief, a wider imposition of divine law using political means, and the establishment of bureaucracy within the church to openly combat “irrational” tendencies in religion.⁵¹ In a slower, more subtle, yet ultimately powerful sense, these efforts would result in a widening of the scope of religious discipline to state discipline at three levels. First, Calvinist disciplinary procedures would widen the scope of individuals addressed as well as the range of reforms implemented; second, the confessionalization of the Calvinist churches reinforced the new reality of structural cleavages within “the church” (and thus within society as a whole) on matters of belief; and third, this in turn created conditions for a social infrastructure designed to foster interactions between diverse confessions and diverse political entities.⁵² In Gorski’s account of the social effects of Calvinism, then, we find that doctrine is downplayed in favor of an emphasis upon the practical aim of improving immanent life which led to the codification and increased uniformity of discipline.⁵³

At first glance, Gorski’s reoccupation of Weber’s project may seem to have drawn us away from the doctrine of providence. But while Gorski does not emphasize the role of doctrine in shaping Calvinist disciplinary practices, it may be that the very features of Calvinism emphasized by Gorski may actually get at the heart of why the implications of predestination—the suggestion of a world completely determined by an opaque divine will—so concerned Weber. It may be that Weber’s account is wrong on certain points, but what Weber’s account offers is the insight that there is a relation between one kind of articulation of the doctrine of providence and a certain kind of dispositional and disciplinary effect. A look at Weber’s writings beyond *The Protestant Ethic* serves as an important

Calvinist societies—new efforts of poor relief, for example, appeared across early modern Europe—Gorski argues that Calvinist societies “went farther, faster” (177n.73).

⁵¹ *DR*, 27-8.

⁵² *DR*, 170-1.

⁵³ One of the questions to keep in mind is the reiteration of the question of the relationship of theology to these more precise features of modern (Calvinist and non-Calvinist) society, and whether theological accounts of providence provide resources to critique these outcomes.

reminder that Weber always had wider concerns, concerns precisely over the forms of social discipline and mastery that Gorski's research explores. For Weber, the crisis of meaning to which the Protestant ethic was one response was precipitated by new forms of generalized rationalization and mechanization that began to take root both within the sphere of religious practice and in the name of religious ideals.

To further grasp what remains at stake in Weber's argument for how we approach Calvin's view of providence, it is important to remember that Weber always had wider concerns around the problem of meaning in modernity, and particularly around the ability for human beings to find meaning in suffering. Here, even in Weber's work, we find the tacit recognition that providence functions not merely as a strictly delimited doctrinal commitment, but as a discourse that structures the meaning of the world's order in relation to human life. But to make the connection between Weber's thesis in *The Protestant Ethic* and his wider interest in the question of meaning, it will be helpful to take a closer look both at Weber's other writings and at his intellectual debt to Nietzsche.

Many have noted a resonance between Weber's work and Nietzsche's observation, in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, that "what actually arouses indignation over suffering is not the suffering itself, but the senselessness of suffering."⁵⁴ In a certain respect, modern projects of the sort documented by Gorski—those aimed at reordering society in the name of alleviating suffering—could be described as an outcome of the general outrage at the experience of suffering, or even as a referendum on prior attempts, by church and state alike, to grant adequate meaning to the immanent experience of suffering. Within the scheme of medieval theological traditions, the task of making meaning out of suffering had largely been assigned to arguments about divine providence that orders the world toward a certain transcendent end.

In this vein, Weber was perhaps not so much concerned that certain teachings on providence *caused* disenchantment, but that a certain teaching about providence in which providence had become

⁵⁴ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, 44.

completely opaque to believers was a visible symptom of disenchantment. After all, a variety of historical studies generally agree that the visible turn away from overtly providential thinking and toward institutionally-grounded efforts at eradicating pain and suffering in Europe coincided with the very period to which Weber's argument refers: the seventeenth century, during and immediately after the post-reformation wars of religion. According to Wilkinson, "cultural historians observe that by the turn of the eighteenth century popular notions of 'special' Providence came to be widely regarded as intellectually untenable as well as politically dangerous."⁵⁵ Weber's overriding concern, however, was not merely to offer a descriptive argument, but rather to critique the adequacy of modern schemes to fill the vacuum that remained in the absence of providential faith.

If there emerged a tendency among post-reformation religious groups (and especially Calvinists) to emphasize the improvement of society through discipline and rationalized social control as a response in part to conditions of suffering, then perhaps this more than any other factor solidified the extent to which modernity as a whole would become characterized by rationalization. For if religion could not maintain a transcendent referent for meaning, then who would? Weber, following Nietzsche, was thus concerned not just with the role of theology in fomenting this turn toward immanent mastery, but even more with the failure of modern methods to adequately provide the transcendent source of meaning that religion had evacuated. Nietzsche's writing is preoccupied with the prospect that modern projects aimed at alleviating suffering through rational mastery are actually, in Wilkinson's words, "liable to draw people towards the abyss of nihilism; for he held that, whatever progress is now made towards the reduction of suffering, we are all still destined to perish, and that thereby, we should recognize that there can be no *sufficient* meaning in life."⁵⁶ In other words, as long as death and human frailty

⁵⁵ Wilkinson, 126.

⁵⁶ Wilkinson, 127.

continue to negate humanity's boldest efforts at meaningful mastery over the world, the failure of such attempts at meaning will only be more tangibly felt.

Weber shared this concern—not only that modern rationalization would be unable to overcome suffering, but that it would grow less and less able to give meaning to inevitable suffering. This concern lies at the center of Weber's disenchantment thesis. As Talcott Parsons has observed,

Weber takes the fundamental position that, *regardless of the particular content of the normative order*, a major element of discrepancy is inevitable. And the more highly rationalized an order, the greater the tension, the greater the exposure of major elements of a population to experiences which are frustrating in the very specific sense, not merely that things happen that contravene their 'interests', but that things happen which are 'meaningless' in the sense that they ought not to happen.⁵⁷

Death thus creates and perpetuates a kind of unwanted alterity at the heart of any calculated system that is aimed specifically to overcome that alterity. And inasmuch as modernity remains dedicated to methods of rationalization, calculation, and mechanization to further its efforts, it repeatedly closes the space for any additional sources of meaning. This suggests that even as modern projects "progress" in the terms of their knowledge and control of immanent life, the inability to overcome death itself means that modernity will only "progress" toward increasing nihilism.

Weber's own words in his essay, "Science as Vocation," are illuminative in this regard. He writes,

[Rationalization] means principally that there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. This means that the world is disenchanted. One need no longer have recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the spirits, as did the savage, for whom such mysterious powers existed. Technical means and calculations perform the service.⁵⁸

He continues his discussion as follows, in conversation with Tolstoy on the question of what death means for a modern person:

⁵⁷ Talcott Parsons, 1966: xlvii. Emphasis original. Quoted in Wilkinson, 128.

⁵⁸ Weber, "Science," 139.

Abraham, or some peasant of the past, died “old and satiated with life” because he stood in the organic cycle of life; because his life, in terms of its meaning and on the eve of his days, had given to him what life had to offer; because for him there remained no puzzles he might wish to solve; and therefore he could have had “enough” of life. Whereas [a] civilized [person], placed in the midst of the continuous enrichment of culture by ideas, knowledge, and problems, may become “tired of life” but not “satiated with life.” He catches only the most minute part of what life of the spirit brings forth ever anew, and what he seizes is always something provisional and not definitive, and therefore death for him is a meaningless occurrence. And because death is meaningless, civilized life as such is meaningless; by its very “progressiveness” it gives death the imprint of meaninglessness.⁵⁹

Weber suggests that in the particular way modernity has come to affirm immanence, it reorients a human being not with respect to nature itself, but with respect to a set of calculated endeavors that exist with the sole purpose of transcending nature. Whereas the peasant of old could be satisfied with life because the meaning of life was connected to the run of the organic cycle, the modern sees the organic cycle as the site of perpetual revision, a project that exceeds the organic lifespan.

A bit later in the essay, Weber directs us back to the explicit role of providence in negotiating this shift, particularly with respect to the pursuit of modern science. Once, he suggests, human beings pursued science as a form of art; now, a reorientation has occurred and art functions as an escape from the domain of science. Weber discusses the role of belief in the dynamics of this change:

If you recall Swammerdam's statement, “Here I bring you the proof of God's providence in the anatomy of a louse,” you will see what the scientific worker, influenced (indirectly) by Protestantism and Puritanism, conceived to be his task: to show the path to God. People no longer found this path among the philosophers, with their concepts and deductions. All pietist theology of the time... knew that God was not to be found along the road by which the Middle Ages had sought him. God is hidden, His ways are not our ways, His thoughts are not our thoughts. In the exact sciences, however, where one could physically grasp His works, one hoped to come upon the traces of what He planned for the world. And today? Who—aside from certain big children who are indeed found in the natural sciences—still believes that the findings of astronomy, biology, physics, or chemistry could teach us anything about the meaning of the world? If there is any such “meaning,” along what road could one come upon its tracks? If these natural sciences lead to anything in this way, they are apt to make the belief that there is such a thing as the ‘meaning’ of the universe die out at its very roots.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Weber, “Science,” 140.

⁶⁰ Weber, “Science,” 142.

This passage raises several questions which will be valuable to keep in mind as we embark on this study. For one, we see a dichotomy between facts and values emerging from the assumption that the methods of modernity have provided unprecedented access to the facts. The status of meaning and value is thus called into question—particularly if meaning is linked to a notion of a transcendent intention that is rendered either completely opaque (as in Weber’s critique of Calvinist predestination) or simply irrelevant to the fact-pursuing enterprise. This leads to a second question, one that will lurk across this project and which I will now begin to consider in greater depth: namely, the question of the structure of meaning itself, or how fundamentally things come to “mean.”

On a quick reading of Weber, he may seem to be connecting meaning to a notion of intention; after all, if meaning is threatened by modern methods, it is because modernity substitutes *intention* with *mechanism* in the process of disenchantment. However, it is important to give due attention to the dual targets of Weber’s critique—not only the hegemony of rationalization that marks modernity, but this combined with the uncritical assumption that there is unified meaning lodged in divine intention. In other words, rationalization fails miserably when it attempts to occupy a structure of meaning that relies upon a unified teleology of divine intention—when it attempts to answer *how things ought to be directed* using methods aimed at merely *how things work*. Steven Seidman articulates Weber’s view of meaning in the following way:

With the dissolution of the unitary world view and the collapse of an organic social order, values and meaning lose their absolutist and quasi-natural character; values break off from overarching symbolic frameworks and become privatized. It is precisely this loss of transcendent rooting which previously secured the objectivity of values that leads to the existentially problematic because contingent nature of values in modernity. This renunciation of transcendent faith coupled to the inability of science to furnish values and meanings yields a condition of the loss of moral certainty.⁶¹

⁶¹ Seidman, 274.

This therefore illumines, once more, why predestination—in spite of the difficulties such a category presents to sociological analysis—remained a key category for Weber’s sociological analysis of capitalism. Predestination, in its most radical articulation, represents not only the assertion that there *is* a unified source for meaning, but renders that meaning utter inaccessibility to human reason. Seidman continues:

In the Puritan—with his or her loss of the certainty of salvation—Weber perceived an anticipation of the modern dilemma. The Puritan, of course, was still a premodern because of his or her transcendent faith. The modern age finds its “natural” moral ambience in the polarity of our personal capacity to create and choose values and our inability to secure moral certitude.⁶²

Seidman thus argues that Weber was not a pessimist concerning the possibility for meaning in modernity, but rather an advocate for the extensive reorientation of values that would be required to retain meaning within the reordering of life represented by modernity.

Seidman describes Weber’s own positive view as follows:

Weber argued that the decline of a unified sociocultural order engenders value pluralism . . . whereas in premodern epochs it was believed that reason or knowledge was unified, modern consciousness asserts the illusory nature of this unity. This unity of reason disintegrates and is replaced by separate value spheres—truth, rightness, beauty—each having their own inner logic and their own mode of knowledge—science, morality, and aesthetic.... Weber concluded that in order for values to serve as a basis for personal meaning, the individual has to translate them into occupational goals to be pursued within the institutional context of everyday life. Without such a translation of values into occupational and institutional terms, values remain merely formal and too far removed from everyday life to secure meaning for the individual. Weber's anxiety about meaning in modernity stems from his belief that bureaucratization tends to undermine a passionate devotion to ends and a vocational ethic. Weber feared that individuals would lose touch with ultimate values so as to be mired in a bureaucratic world of technical means, with its idealization of efficiency, order, and security.⁶³

This move from unified to plural, individualized values to be pursued through the medium of the separation of spheres, the exercise of individual autonomy, and the activity of occupation, thus

⁶² Seidman, 274.

⁶³ Seidman, 276, 276-7.

represents Weber's secularization thesis in relation to Protestantism. The turn toward immanence and the emphasis on individual vocation once relied on the premise of a unified divine decree, but in practice acted to disintegrate that very premise. In Gorski's account, religious discipline became state discipline, explicitly designed to mediate across the differences of values rather than to reinforce one value. The subsequent re-definition of meaning therefore happens under the purview of the practical turn toward immanence, and it is a re-definition contingent on the realizing of individualized meaning through the differentiation of one's vocation and one's relationships.

Weber thus gestures toward an alternate understanding of meaning that is connected neither to the intentionality of unified divine will nor the methods for rationalization privileged by modernity. Rather, for Weber, the hope for meaning in modernity hinges upon the way individual human beings approach the world in terms of its differentiation—through work, through art, through civic life and voluntary associations. We glimpse, here, an approach to meaning that does not oppose it to fact, but relates meaning to how one disposes oneself with respect to things that present as facts. Meaning thus has to do with the practices one cultivates in order to relate to the world, rather than with a divine intentionality that provides the world with a prefabricated arc of meaning.

An understanding of this structure of meaning is deepened, once again, by looking back at Nietzsche, for whom we have seen these questions were central. In *On the Genealogy of Morals*—a text which we have seen addresses the human need to find meaning in suffering—Nietzsche also considers the role of the ascetic ideal in responding to this very need for meaning. While he excoriates the ascetic ideal within Christianity for its rejection of immanent life in order to defer all meaning to a transcendent future, he also recognizes that at the heart of ascetic practices there lies a powerful life-affirming gesture: even the will to nothingness within this immanent sphere is still a will, even a defiant will. It thus performs a fundamental gesture of saying “yes” to life, even if it is a life beyond this life.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, 121.

Nietzsche's treatment of the ascetic ideal therefore remains deeply ambivalent. While he rejects its other-worldly orientation, he maintains that the search for meaning through assuming a disciplined relation to one's self—through practices that cultivate both body and will—are necessarily components of what it means to affirm life. In order to finding meaning in suffering through the affirmation of life, one must learn to reorient one's relation to life without resentment—even and especially the resentment or revenge that wants to locate the meaning of life in the renunciation of life itself. This means willing not the rejection of this life because of its suffering, but willing the value of life itself even *with* suffering.⁶⁵

Tyler Roberts's work is helpful in understanding how, for Nietzsche, the question of meaning becomes disconnected from transcendent intentionality and reoriented toward how one engages immanence itself. This is not a denial of the role of intention or of the will, but rather a transference of the locus of meaning away from intention and toward the way various *practices* that involve discipline, intention, and affirmation can enable a new and fuller experience of meaning within the world itself. In other words, meaning becomes connected not to the dictation of the will toward an ultimate end, but instead to the strategies through which willing and intending beings cultivate their relationships to the contours of a material life that includes suffering. In this way, one learns to negotiate practices aimed not to reject life in favor of another life, but to know and love life for what it is. In Roberts' view,

Nietzsche's asceticism is not the life-denying asceticism of the ascetic ideal, suffering practiced for the sake of ending all suffering, but a practice of opening oneself to the conflicting, painful reality of life and world in active engagement with them. This asceticism recognizes and affirms the power of suffering in the creation of spirit; it is a practice of suffering.... Nietzsche's is a practice of writing and thinking in which he cultivates the openness to, even the participation with, becoming. Rather than metaphysical mastery, Nietzsche as writer practices a responsiveness to the mystery and the power of the world—or, as I have put it, a passion for the real, passion in the sense of strong desire, and in the sense of the pain of submission to the real. Only with such passion is the creation of spirit possible: in Nietzsche's ascetic/mystical practice

⁶⁵ This movement is depicted most powerfully in *Zarathustra*, 153-88 and 252-66.

of transfiguration, suffering leads to joy, abysmal thought and bodily pain are transfigured into affirmative spirit.⁶⁶

The difference Roberts highlights between the denial of life and the transfiguration of life is key; this relocates the question of meaning not to the “end” of life (both literally and teleologically) but rather to the full contours of life *in medias res*, and experiencing a life that is irreducible to the sum of its parts.

One can perhaps see, at this point, a shift in *how* one understands the meaning of suffering—a shift from (a) willing to use suffering to move beyond life, and thus performing the intentional rationalization of suffering; to (b) willing this life with its inevitable suffering, and thus assuming a different relationship to the significance of suffering. One way that we can better understand the difference between these two approaches is to briefly look at the relationship between Nietzsche’s discussion of the ascetic ideal in *On the Genealogy of Morals* and the way a certain kind of life-affirming asceticism is performed in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.⁶⁷

Across the four parts of *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche depicts not only the variety of practices but also the conflicting desires and anguish that confront one who is dedicated to the creation of immanent meaning in the absence of God. For Zarathustra, this exercise is nothing so simple as the mere rejection of transcendence; he recognizes the presence of and even the need for transcendence in the activity of the human will alone, even in the absence of belief in divine transcendence. Zarathustra does not reject transcendence, but pursues a different kind of transcendence through exercises aimed at the reorientation of the self with respect to immanence. In Roberts’ words, this entails “attending to the dynamic of self-denial and self-affirmation in the process of exercising a specific self,” and thus appreciating “kinetic relationships between ‘no’ and ‘yes,’ suffering and affirmation, discipline and

⁶⁶ Tyler T. Roberts, *Contesting Spirit: Nietzsche, Affirmation, Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 168.

⁶⁷ This intertextual relationship is explicit: the essays that comprise *On the Genealogy of Morals* are marked with quotations from the character Zarathustra, thus providing a wider mythical frame in which to situate the philosophical questions advanced in Nietzsche’s own name in *Genealogy*.

freedom.”⁶⁸ Perhaps the key practice through which Zarathustra reorients himself to life—a practice involving both cognition and material encounter in relationship to each other—is that through which Zarathustra wills the eternal recurrence of all things, past and future, among them pain and agony. This affirmative “yes” to the full temporal and spatial reality of life treats suffering neither as a finite good nor an evil, but as a feature of life itself. By pursuing a different orientation with respect to aspects of life that would once elicit pity or revulsion—and thus by *resignifying* these aspects through affirmation—Zarathustra ultimately assumes a form of transcendence that returns him ecstatically to the world as it is.⁶⁹

This account of meaning, and particularly meaning in relation to suffering, does not rest upon the category of intention in a unidirectional sense that runs either against or beyond reality. Rather, it suggests that the key category associated with meaning is a practice of encountering reality through exercises of differentiation, receptivity, and affirmation. This pursuit of meaning involves practices of repetition that do not reify a difference between facts and values, but seeks to engage and alter the relations between things through the different uses of values. One way to conceptualize this difference would be to think about what is entailed in whether one associates “meaning” with the synonym “intend,” or alternatively with the synonym “signify.” In a discussion of Nietzsche’s relationship to the ascetic ideal, M.J. Bowles captures the force of this latter approach to meaning: “One does not overcome an impulse, a prejudice, a social practice, simply by an act of intention: no power is felt simply by resolving not to participate. One only overcomes one’s own world and its ways of doing things by constructing stronger forces that are capable of meeting and digesting what has gone before.”⁷⁰ Within

⁶⁸ Roberts, 20.

⁶⁹ Roberts offers an interesting discussion of the way Nietzsche relates to the meaning of suffering without mitigation through Zarathustra and its possible relation to forms of Christian theology and mysticism. See Roberts, 170-ff.

⁷⁰ M.J. Bowles, “The Practice of Meaning in Nietzsche and Wittgenstein,” in *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, No. 26 (2003): 16. Nietzsche quote is from *Genealogy*, III.12.

this view, meaning asserts that there are no facts without values, there are no mere things without patterns of signification through which one can grasp and negotiate the differentiation of things.

Associating meaning and value strictly with intention cannot by itself enable a new relation to the world or a new way of perceiving value or possibility; this becomes all the more the case when a notion of meaning linked to intention is transferred from divine to human values and thus pluralized, as became the case in Weber's critical account of modernity.⁷¹ If meaning is to carry force, especially in a time marked by methods of rationalization and mechanization, it must be associated with what meaning is able to *do*—with enabling multiple ways of re-envisioning and differently-engaging reality itself. This is why, for Nietzsche, the practice of meaning centrally involved a practice of writing and re-writing the world. To quote Roberts' once more, "Rather than metaphysical mastery, Nietzsche as writer practices a responsiveness to the mystery and the power of the world—or, as I have put it, a passion for the real, passion in the sense of strong desire, and in the sense of the pain of submission to the real."⁷² In this view, meaning arises out of the writer's attention to reality, to the conventions through which reality has been named, and to the multiplicity of ways these conventions can be used to re-present, disrupt and re-connect the world anew. By affirming the eternal recurrence even of suffering, the will recognizes the reality of suffering and its conventional significance—as thing without or subversive of meaning—while performing an exercise of re-signification through which suffering is related to the whole of life itself. By this act of affirmation, suffering no longer directs one through resentment to other-worldly asceticism as if this were its purpose; rather, suffering is constitutive of the joy Zarathustra achieves through saying yes to the reality of life itself.⁷³

⁷¹ For a critique of Weber's notion of polytheism of values as leading necessarily to the conflict of intentions, see Jay A. Ciaffa, *Max Weber and the Problems of Value-Free Social Science* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1998), 82

⁷² Roberts, 168, quoted above.

⁷³ In *Zarathustra*, affirmation is something performed more than explained. Whenever the character of Zarathustra reaches the point of affirmation, he breaks out in verse, song, or dance, leaving fragments of claims

that point a different sort of meaning that emanates from his own reorientation with respect to life rather than with having discovered an overarching meaning for life. See, for example, the following passages:

And often it swept me off my feet and up and away, in the midst of my laughter, where I flew quivering, an arrow, through sun-drunken delight:

– off into distant futures not yet glimpsed in dreams, into hotter souths than any artist ever dreamed of; there, where dancing gods are ashamed of all clothing:

– so that I must speak in parables and limp and stutter like the poets;

and truly, I am ashamed that I must still be a poet! – Where all becoming seemed to me the dance of gods and the mischief of gods, and the world seemed unloosed and frolicsome and as though it were fleeing back to itself:

– as an eternal fleeing from and seeking each other again of many gods, as the blissful contradicting, again-hearing, again-nearing each other of many gods:

Where all time seemed to me a blissful mockery of moments, where necessity was freedom itself, which played blissfully with the sting of freedom:

Where I once again found my old devil and arch-enemy, the spirit of gravity, and everything he created: compulsion, statute, necessity and consequence and purpose and will and good and evil:

For must there not exist something over which one dances, dances away? Must not, for the sake of the light and the lightest – moles and heavy dwarves exist? – (157-8);

Pain is also a joy, a curse is also a blessing, night is also a sun – go away or else you will learn: a wise man is also a fool. Have you ever said Yes to one joy? Oh my friends, then you also said Yes to all pain. All things are enchained, entwined, enamored –

– if you ever wanted one time two times, if you ever said “I like you, happiness! Whoosh! Moment!” then you wanted everything back!

– Everything anew, everything eternal, everything enchained, entwined, enamored, oh thus you loved the world –

– you eternal ones, love it eternally and for all time; and say to pain also: refrain, but come back! For all joy wants – eternity!

All joy want the eternity of all things, wants honey, wants resin, wants drunken midnight, wants graves, wants tomb-tears’ solace, wants gilded sunset –

–what does joy not want? It is thirstier, heartier, hungrier, more terrible, more mysterious than all pain, it wants itself, it bites into itself, the ring’s will wrestles in it – it wants love, it wants hate, it is super-rich, bestows, throws away, begs for someone to take it, thanks the taker, it would like to be hated –

– so rich is its joy that it thirsts for pain, for hell, for hate, for disgrace, for the cripple, for world – this world, oh you know it well!

You higher men, it longs for you, does joy, the unruly, blissful one – for your pain, you failures! All eternal joy longs for failures.

This leads back to question of the role played by providence in enabling different ways of thinking about meaning. Weber's account of modernity links the process of disenchantment to the secularization of a certain notion of divine providence—one in which the world's unified meaning is linked to the intentionality of a hidden transcendent governing order; this notion of meaning is then transferred into an immanent frame. This precipitates a crisis of meaning insofar as the rational methods which modernity uses to present the world as an object of knowledge and mastery are methods that assume a troubled relation to intentionality—either claiming neutrality with respect to values, or promising a kind of meaning that these methods are unable to achieve. I have already noted ways that for Nietzsche a response to this crisis of meaning will entail not a rejection of transcendence, but a reorientation of the relation between transcendence and immanence. That is, in order to maintain a sense of meaningfulness, one should not expect rationalization to occupy the structural role once filled by a unified transcendent order; one ought rather to negotiate more diverse ways of orienting the self to the significance of the immanent world for human life.⁷⁴

For all joy wants itself, and therefore wants all misery too! Oh happiness, oh pain! Oh break, my heart!
 You higher men, learn this, joy wants eternity
 – Joy wants the eternity of *all* things, *wants deep, wants deep eternity!* (263).

These passages follow after extensive trials on the part of Zarathustra to address suffering without the resentment or revenge against immanent life that he associates with linking the meaning of suffering to some kind of otherworldly end or justification (in the terms of *Genealogy*, the ascetic ideal). It is possible to glimpse, here, not only a refusal to narrate a meaning for suffering based on transcendent intention, but also an attendant willingness to relate suffering to life as a whole, and thus to signify it in relation to the differentiation of immanent experience, and in so doing to affirm it with life and lived viewed as a whole.

⁷⁴ It is worth noting some similarity between these forms of meaning and Derrida's critical re-reading of J. L. Austin's performative theory of language, a discussion which concerns how one can philosophically account for language's multifaceted ability to mean. In *How To Do Things With Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), Austin initially relies upon a notion of intention in order to distinguish the constative (language that describes), from the performative (language that enacts). In "Signature Event Context" in *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), Derrida points out the difficulty of relying on the category of intention, in a rigorous sense, to distinguish between descriptive and performative functions of language; rather, he argues that the performative function relies on the iterability of the sign and is thus a general feature of language. Just as accounting for the meaning of suffering based solely on divine intention lapses into opacity or neutrality, accounting for the meaning of language based on the intention of the speaker/author presents similar difficulties. Attention to the relationship between convention, iterability, and context in order to locate the kind of meaning *performed* through language avoids this difficulty, and invites intention to be viewed as one secondary feature of

In the next chapter as well as in my reading of Calvin, I will look at how various articulations of providence have employed divine intentionality versus repetitive practices of signification when negotiating the question of meaning. If Weber's argument about modernity's crisis of meaning is a compelling indictment of a unilateral view of providence that hinges upon divine intentionality—one borne out in the general rejection of providence as a useful discourse among religious and secular lay persons alike—then it will become all the more important to look at alternate ways providence has been figured and look for the traces of these other articulations in other domains. For now, I will leave this particular set of questions behind and look at more overtly political readings of the role of providence and theological symbolism more generally.

III. Providence and Collective Order: Gauchet and Agamben

If Löwith and Weber were concerned about the inability of matter to signify without a unified and accessible system of transcendent values to grant meaning, then the most defiant response to this concern would likely draw from the work of Karl Marx. Marx's dialectical materialism can be read precisely as an attempt to account for how material life contains and works out its own meaning. Readers of Marx remain divided on how to best characterize the relationships Marx animates between rational processes, a moral arc, and the engine of material dialectics.⁷⁵ Still, it is evident that both empirical and theoretical critiques of the association between material reality and rationality after the Second World War dealt a severe blow to the credibility of some versions of Marxism. In his recent book, *The Adventures of the Symbolic: Post-Marxism and Radical Democracy* (2013), Warren Breckman

context. Within this latter framework, interpretation thus involves not divining the intention of the author or speaker (or the divine will), but rather attending to the disposition of signs in particular contexts and the meanings that are thus performed through relationships of sameness and difference.

⁷⁵ See, for example, Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994).

argues that this crisis led to a resurgence of interest in the power and active function of political and social symbolisms:

The collapse of [one version of] Marxism prompted numerous thinkers to attempt to reconceptualize the emancipatory project with the resources of the symbolic turn. That collapse has in turn reopened the question of religion, which classical Marxism had pushed to the sidelines of its analysis of capitalist modernity.... With the collapse of Marxism, what is the status of the European left's longstanding commitment to secularism?⁷⁶

Breckman understands the “symbolic turn” to refer to “the loose set of affiliated ideas and approaches that characterize a broad range of thinkers who have stressed the non-correspondence of words and things, the non-transparency of language, and the power of signs to constitute the things they purportedly represent.”⁷⁷ Interest in the performative power of language, particularly with respect to the organization of the immanent (political and ethical) order, thus emerges when order is conceptually delinked from either (a) a determinant transcendent intention or (b) from the immanent nature of materiality itself. This basic insight reiterates the question of the relation between theology and politics, although in a different register. It is no longer a question of whether theology was transferred into a separate realm of politics. The question is rather how certain kinds of language operate across theological and political spheres.

When viewed in this way, theological language becomes interesting not only as a mere historical artifact nor an object of private or communitarian belief, but also in its ability to figure and relate

⁷⁶ Warren Breckman, *The Adventures of the Symbolic: Post-Marxism and Radical Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 22. Qualification is mine. Authors whom Breckman engages as different responses to this critique of Marxism and turn toward the symbolic include: Derrida's *Specters of Marx*; Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (New York: Verso, 1985); “Post-Marxism Without Apologies,” in Ernesto Laclau, ed., *New Reflections on the Revolutions of Our Time* (London: Verso, 1990), 97–132; Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Louis Althusser, “The Crisis of Marxism,” in *Power and Opposition in Post-Revolutionary Societies*, trans. P. Camiller (London: Ink Links, 1979); essays by Cornelius Castoriadis in David Ames Curtis, trans. and ed., *World in Fragments: Writings on Politics, Society, Psychoanalysis, and the Imagination*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997); and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L'Institution dans l'histoire personnelle et publique: Le problème de la passivité. Le sommeil, l'inconscient, la mémoire. Notes de cours au Collège de France (1954–1955)* (Paris: Belin, 2003).

⁷⁷ Breckman, 11.

immanent objects (with recourse to transcendent ideas and symbols). This returns us not only to recognizably theological categories—such as transcendence, sovereignty, providence—but also to the writings in which these categories are narratively and argumentatively situated. They draw our attention, that is, to the particularity of the writing itself and its capacity to perform a particular and iterable performance of the relationship between words and things. For theologians, these questions bring to the fore the fundamental relationship between theological ideas, material conditions, and forms of practice. Attending to these more recent contributions to so-called political theology not only encourages renewed attention to close readings of theological texts; it also underscores the importance of reading theological texts alongside questions of history and materiality in order to grasp their range and surplus of meanings. In other words, when looking at something like providence, it is imperative to develop ways of asking about the political and practical function of the doctrine alongside questions of its philosophical coherence.

The two authors I look at in this section provide different ways of getting at this question from the perspective of political philosophy. Gauchet offers a relatively novel account of secularization that gives attention to the continuity of theological categories with respect to the structure of democratic political institutions—particularly the symbolic vocabulary of transcendence and immanence which also underwrites accounts of providence. Gauchet, however, sees the language of theology as having undergone a gradual process of disenchantment, by which he means it has been severed from forms of ritual participation and come to organize a rationalized process of discursive responsibility. Gauchet's argument provides some conceptual tools that will ultimately allow me to ask how Calvin's articulation of transcendence and immanence reshapes practices of political responsibility. I will argue, however, that Gauchet too readily dismisses forms of aesthetic participation that are likewise retained between theological and political life.

This is a point that is helpfully concretized by Agamben. Of these two authors, Agamben gives more attention to aesthetic and performative dimensions of theological language and their capacity to constitute forms of political participation. After looking at his argument about providence, I will close with a brief discussion of his open reflections on this method and its use for critiquing other earlier methods put to use by secularization theory. While I find certain gaps in Agamben's concrete account of the relationship between providence and modern democratic governance, I will suggest that his approach to political theology invites precisely the kind of reading of Calvin that I will ultimately perform in this project.

a. Gauchet

Marcel Gauchet's *The Disenchantment of the World* (1983) is a difficult yet compelling conceptual analysis of democracy that accounts both for the subtractive decline of "religion" and the persistence of religious structures. As a self-described "speculative history," *Disenchantment* may seem to overstep the limitations of responsible historiography, but its philosophical interest comes into focus alongside the debates outlined above that emerged in the aftermath of Marx, Nietzsche, Weber, Schmitt, and the events of the first half of the twentieth century. If Schmitt and Löwith argued that there persists a fundamental relationship between religion and politics in spite of modernity's disavowals, Gauchet argues, first, for the ultimate distinction between the two. Nevertheless, he insists on the structural persistence of transcendence within a disenchanted world. This continuation of transcendence within a wholly immanent frame results, he argues, from a certain non-determinative trajectory of Christian theology and Protestantism. This trajectory, always contingent, would come to establish the terms in which democratic institutions thrive as a form of political reason.

To better understand Gauchet's thesis, it is helpful to look briefly at the work of his teacher, Claude Lefort, who took up the question of the symbolic relation of the theological and political in a

post-Marxian and anti-Schmittian register.⁷⁸ Lefort argued that to assume the underlying coincidence of theology and the political undermined the ability to appreciate and grasp the power of the symbolic with respect to the political—a symbolism that changes alongside the political over time. This position is inspired by Ernst Kantorowicz’ influential work, *The King’s Two Bodies: Studies in Medieval Political Theology* (1957). Kantorowicz’ work responds to Schmitt’s thesis precisely by examining the multiplicity of ways in which the body of the king as particular has been figured in relation to the general divine office of the king as the locus of power—or, we might say, the different symbolisms or mechanics of sovereignty beyond merely Schmitt’s nominalist decisionism. Kantorowicz relies, especially, upon mythic and literary figurations of the problem of the king’s two bodies, for example the way in which the problematic relation of the mortal and charismatic body to the immortal and constitutional body of the king has been narrativized in authors such as Dante and Shakespeare. In Victoria Kahn’s appraisal,

Kantorowicz finds in literature an exemplary self-consciousness about the symbolic dimension of human experience, about the human capacity to make and unmake symbolic forms. In modern terms, we might say that, in Kantorowicz’s reading of Shakespeare and Dante, literature reveals both its capacity for ideological critique and for enabling fictions of human community. It can serve as an antidote to political theology of the Schmittian sort, even as it authorizes a new vision—a new “secular ‘political theology,’” to borrow Kantorowicz’s phrase—of the human community.⁷⁹

Kahn further suggests that, central to Kantorowicz’s project was the conviction, articulated in his essay, “The Sovereignty of the Artist,” that there was a medieval shift stemming from the Christian doctrine of creation in which art was seen not to imitate nature, but to create new laws and arrangements of

⁷⁸ My discussion is indebted especially to chapter four of Breckman.

⁷⁹ Victoria Kahn, “Political Theology and Fiction in *The King’s Two Bodies*,” *Representations* 106:1 (Spring, 2009): 81.

nature.⁸⁰ Here we return once again to themes we have seen already, not only the impact of *creatio ex nihilo* but also of providence as the ongoing economy of creation. Linked to the creative power of the divine or the sovereign, the order of society now emerged not from nature but from the symbolic order of the fictive.

Kahn argues that this presents a scheme in which, for Kantorowicz, “a legal fiction is distinguished from a literary fiction only by its institutional home”⁸¹—a claim which likewise bears on the relationship between the theological and the political. If the last section acknowledged the turn in Nietzsche and others to a notion of meaning that emerges out of the relationship between writing (here in as fictive narration) and material arrangements, we find that interrelationship also emerging not just at the level of collective life, but specifically institutional political life. Moreover, we find our attention directed once more to theology, not just as an “object” undergoing secularization or transference, but as a symbolic repository both emerging from and itself creating possibilities for social arrangements. In Kahn’s words,

Theology, for Kantorowicz, is always already about representational fictions, which is one of the reasons we can use legal and literary fictions as resources for reconceiving the relationship between politics and theology. Kantorowicz develops a new model that doesn’t deny the theological origins of secularism or the constitutional implications of absolutism. But against Schmitt, he links secularism with positive constitutional developments.⁸²

Kantorowicz’s general awareness that grasping the symbolic structure of overlapping theological and political narratives can create possibilities for altering political order links Kantorowicz to Lefort, whose work was aimed at envisioning forms of radical democracy.

Lefort would argue, following Kantorowicz’s interest in the problem of the two bodies of the king, that the relationship between the visible and the invisible is retained in modern political life as a

⁸⁰ Kahn, 87.

⁸¹ Kahn, 87.

⁸² Kahn, 94.

way of precisely resisting the reduction of politics to religion (or their total separation). In his essay titled “The Permanence of the Theologico-Political?”, Lefort writes that “both the political and the religious bring philosophical thought face to face with the symbolic, not in the sense in which the social sciences understand that term, but in the sense that, through their internal articulations, both the political and the religious govern access to the world.”⁸³ On the ongoing relationship of theology to the political, Lefort continues,

to simplify the argument to extremes: what philosophical thought cannot adopt as its own, on pain of betraying its ideal of intelligibility, is the assertion that the man Jesus is the Son of God; what it must accept is the meaning of the advent of a representation of the *GodMan*, because it sees it as a change which recreates humanity's opening on to itself, in both the senses in which we have defined it. Modern philosophy cannot ignore its debt to modern religion; it can no longer distance itself from the work of the imagination or appropriate it as a pure object of knowledge, once it finds itself grappling with the question of its own advent.⁸⁴

In this language of “humanity’s opening on to itself,” Lefort is arguing not for a strict continuity of theology but for the ongoing effect of a symbolic figuration that gave way to a certain form of self-consciousness—“a primal division which is constitutive of the space we call society.”⁸⁵ This division between the “real” and the symbolic representation of the “other,” in Lefort’s words,

ensures that society can achieve a quasi-representation of itself. We must of course be careful not to project this externality on to the real; if we did so it would no longer have any meaning for society. It would be more accurate to say that power makes a gesture towards something *outside*, and that it defines itself in terms of that outside. Whatever its form, it always refers to the same enigma: that of an internal-external articulation, of a division which institutes a common space, of a break which establishes relations, of a movement of the externalization of the social which goes hand in hand with its internalization.⁸⁶

⁸³ Claude Lefort, “The Permanence of the Theologico-Political?” in *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans. David Macey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 222.

⁸⁴ Lefort, 223. Emphasis in original.

⁸⁵ Lefort, 225.

⁸⁶ Lefort, 225. Emphasis in original.

Though this relationship between the internal and external remains at the center of modern democracy, Lefort argues that there is yet something novel about modern democracy with respect to earlier forms of the theologico-political. In his view, modernity is defined not by the turn to immanence or rationalization alone, but by the *disincorporation* of the political—the refusal to associate the seat of political power with any particular body. Lefort writes about this feature and its implications:

I have for a long time concentrated upon this peculiarity of modern democracy: of all the regimes of which we know, it is the only one to have represented power in such a way as to show that power is an empty place and to have thereby maintained a gap between the symbolic and the real. It does so by virtue of a discourse which reveals that power belongs to no one; that those who exercise power do not possess it; that they do not, indeed, embody it; that the exercise of power requires a periodic and repeated contest; that the authority of those vested with power is created and re-created as a result of the manifestation of the will of the people.⁸⁷

For Lefort, in other words, the religious claim of the “*GodMan*” establishes the terms through which sameness and otherness are related, but denies their unity by means of incarnation in favor of the constant deconstruction and recreation of power through an indeterminate democratic practice.

One effect of this feature is that modernity retains an unprecedented awareness concerning the range of symbolisms that shape modern society and their effects, but always maintains a separation between the realm of the imagination (as the proper site of the symbolic) and the realm of the “real.” This is at once an example of the ontological *effects* that remain in the operation of the symbolic and the overcoming of a certain view of the power of the symbolic. In other words, the multivalence of the symbolic has in fact created an ontological landscape, but it is a novel landscape in which the symbolic retains its permanence but is no longer fused with reality as it was in the past. In Kahn’s view, this shift undergirds the unique role of fiction in modern society—as the site that figures, but never really completely incarnates the social. Ethically, for Kahn along with Kantorowicz and Lefort, this provides a

⁸⁷ Lefort, 225. Emphasis in original.

way to recognize the persistence of transcendence and immanence at the heart of modern democracy⁸⁸ while curtailing such symbolic incarnations as modern fascism, communism, or religious fundamentalism. Democracy relies on and even welcomes multiple articulations of the symbolic arrangement between transcendence and immanence precisely because the symbolic is no longer incarnated, but now operates in the realm of the imagination. In Breckman's analysis, "Democratic power may thus be contested—indeed it depends on that contest—but no one can appropriate or incarnate it, nor can such power be 'represented.'"⁸⁹ While this is on the one hand a decisive break from the corporeality of the religious and monarchical past, it is on the other hand the continuation of a scheme in which the symbolic retains its role in effecting creative potential with respect to politics—and therefore one in which the "theological" interest in transcendence and immanence continue to shape forms of practice.⁹⁰

Gauchet would take up Lefort's interests, agreeing that the separation of the political from the religious occurs in modernity in such a way that the basic division between transcendence and immanence is not only retained, but continues to found political life.⁹¹ Against Lefort, however, Gauchet argues for a *reincorporation* of transcendence in the operation of democratic institutions.⁹² He undergirds this thesis in *The Disenchantment of the World* with a sweeping "political history of religion" that distinctively draws from both Durkheim and Weber to argue that the rise of transcendence actually undermines religion as the sacred social bond and thus coincides with the reduction and eventual elimination of religion itself. This version of the secularization thesis offers several interesting twists to

⁸⁸ See, for example, Lefort, 254-5.

⁸⁹ Breckman, 164.

⁹⁰ See Breckman, 164-5.

⁹¹ It should be noted that among others, Gauchet was also notably influenced by Cornelius Castoriadis.

⁹² Gauchet, *DW*, 3.

the issues under investigation: the structure of “meaning” in modernity, the relation and function of transcendence in modernity, and the particular role given to the sixteenth-century movements of reform in shaping modernity. One twist is obvious from the outset: Gauchet claims—against someone like Blumenberg, who associated human self-assertion with the turn toward immanence⁹³—that a greater emphasis on transcendence actually implies an *increase* in human agency. Another twist in Gauchet’s account—against Weber, Funkenstein, and even someone more recent like Charles Taylor⁹⁴—is that the decline of “religion” begins not with late medieval nominalism, nor with the sixteenth-century movements of reform, but more than five thousand years ago with the rise of the ancient state as a political entity. The purchase of Gauchet’s distinct narrative lies not only in the resources it offers to our understanding of what is at stake in different approaches to the relationship between transcendence and immanence, but also the way Gauchet links these to the actual institutional practices of democratic politics in modernity.

To gain a hold on relevant aspects of Gauchet’s argument, it is first necessary to understand his particular definition of religion.⁹⁵ For Gauchet, religion in its “pure state” existed only in the primeval past, and is defined by human dispossession of, and utter dependence on, a sacred that is identified with the cyclical immanent order. According to Gauchet, “If we believe that at the core of the religious lies an implicit assumption that whatever causes and justifies the visible human sphere lies outside this sphere, then we must acknowledge that this assumption has received its fullest expression and its most

⁹³ See Blumenberg, 137-44.

⁹⁴ As I noted above, Taylor links the modern social imaginary to the increasing preoccupation with Reform [sic] that traces back to nominalism and is more concretely realized in the Protestant reformations. See footnote 21, and Taylor, *SA*, 61-2, 77-ff.

⁹⁵ This definition is both crucial to tying Gauchet’s narrative together and vulnerable to criticism for being over-determined. In Gorski and Ateş Altınordu’s view, Gauchet’s definition is so narrow that such a phenomenon may never have existed to begin with. It is less clear that this critique threatens Gauchet’s argument, since it is typological more than historical. See Gorski and Ateş Altınordu, “After Secularization?” in *Annual Review of Sociology* 34 (2008): 55-85.

detailed interpretation and application in primitive societies.”⁹⁶ This unbounded religion of immanence is threatened in principle by the rise of the state, first, because the boundedness of the political body of the state (in any form) creates conceptual space for both limitation and transcendence; and second, because the active negotiation of these boundaries comes under the purview of the previously-dispossessed “human sphere.” For Gauchet,

The State actually returns the Religious Other to the human sphere, thus presupposing [in principle] its prior absence.... Imposing an order, even in the name of its inviolable legitimacy, means changing it, however quietly or surreptitiously. This makes the order pass imperceptibly from the level of the received to that of the willed—which has considerable repercussions on how its authors and its foundations are portrayed.... The State ushers in the age of opposition between the social structure and the essence of the religious. Political domination, which decisively entangles the gods in history, will prove to be the invisible hoist lifting us out of the religious.⁹⁷

This claim constitutes the base from which Gauchet can make his argument that religion has been in a state of decline for thousands of years.

Within this narrative, markers such as the rise of monotheism or the rise of Christianity which in some narratives have been taken as markers of religious development,⁹⁸ are for Gauchet markers of religious decline. When God becomes separated from nature and associated with a political entity, knowledge of God becomes mediated by revelation, decrees, and divine law, thus coinciding with the decline of myth and ritual that are central to “religion” as Gauchet understands it. Furthermore, as human consciousness begins to *respond* to a divine revelation and law coming from beyond the world, human consciousness becomes disembedded from nature and humans themselves gradually assume a free and distinct posture with respect to the immanent order. The search for the reinstitution of religion

⁹⁶ DW, 33.

⁹⁷ DW, 34, 36, 37.

⁹⁸ Examples of this kind of assumption are found in a variety of texts especially from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. See G. W. F. Hegel’s *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Carol Cosman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

may in fact drive the development of monotheism by distinguishing between the one God and the multiplicity of political powers; it does so, however, by ratcheting up divine transcendence rather than by restoring the sacral bond of dispossession. Far from returning human beings to nature, monotheisms create two spheres in tension and opposed to nature—the political, and the sacred site of the other.

This narrative both illumines the force of certain Christian doctrines, such as the doctrine of the incarnation and the doctrine of providence, while also emphasizing that these doctrines are unable to overcome the division that drives the decline of religion. The incarnation on one level incarnates the human and the other into one body; at the same time, that divine-human body is narrativized in a posture of opposition to the state, thus furthering the conceptual division—and need for rational mediation—between spheres.⁹⁹ And providence, far from returning the sacred to immanence, founds the immanent order on the inviolable and transcendent decision of God. Here, we see a narrative of secularization attached to providence similar to that which appears in authors from Weber to Funkenstein. According to Gauchet,

The development of our modern understanding of the world in terms of objective necessity is closely related to the affirmation-propagation of the divine absolute. Deepening God's subjective plenitude destroys the vestiges of the ancient hierarchical cosmic vision, expels any residual occult forces from the material essence of things, and ultimately leads us to conceive a series of phenomena rigidly determined by sufficient reason. At the end of this development lies a mind-set diametrically opposed to the mythical one—just as the conjunction/disjunction of the visible and the invisible, which organizes transcendent religion, is the counterpart to the religion of the founding past.

In other words, Gauchet is arguing that the more God's full presence is conceived at a distance removed from the world, hidden in a secret decree, the more the originary terms of religion as participation are undermined. He goes on to describe the outcome of this:

In both [of these] cases, present reality is determined by a principle completely external to it: in the first [religious-mythical one], by the origin and the founding past; in the second [divided one], by the divine subject and its unlimited self-presence. The only difference is that this

⁹⁹ *DW*, 81-3.

transition from absolute past to absolute presence amounts to reversing what can be conceived about the foundation, as well as being a complete turnaround in man's relation to the ultimate source of meaning in his universe. Since the origin has already occurred, it cannot be determined but only recited and repeated, while God's mind, though clearly unfathomable in its depths, is still accessible through its effects, because of his work's perfection and necessity. The deity culminates in absolute self-unity signaling its ultimate separation from us, and leaves the world to us to understand, to penetrate and change in every way.¹⁰⁰

Gauchet thus asserts, following Lefort, that with the institution of political life comes a permanent division between self and other that at once founds human consciousness but forbids a return to a religion defined in terms of unity.

This suggests that what is really at stake in modernity is not the shift from immanence to transcendence, but the more fundamental and irrecoverable shift from participation to rational discourse. This does not forbid religiously-driven attempts to continue to situate the two. Gauchet argues that a range of such efforts is not only visible in the present outside of modern Western democracy, but characterized the hierarchical structure of the Christian middle ages. The Church at this time operated not only to provide a working interface for transcendence and immanence to mitigate their distance, but also to restore the possibility for participation by closing the gap between revelation and its range of interpretations. According to Gauchet,

At the origins of the Church's existence was a special type of mediating claim, one grafted directly onto the Christ-centered mediation it tried to make permanent. Christ revealed the abyss between the human and the divine by showing that God's will could only reach us through the Word becoming flesh.... The Church's position, ambition and role made it a wholly original institution: the first bureaucracy to give history meaning, the first administration of ultimate meaning. It had to administer a definitively determined doctrine and body of regulations.... It was necessary to enforce the detailed contents of practices and belief, and even more, to exert a guiding control over each individual act of faith because determining God's living will was seen to be a deeply questionable undertaking.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ *DW*, 62-3.

¹⁰¹ *DW*, 134-5.

In this view, religious institutions were essentially secularized into political institutions. In Gauchet's view the process of disenchantment did not begin with the movements of reform; rather, the Protestant reformations openly addressed and exacerbated a division that always already operated at the heart of church and political life prior to the sixteenth century—a division between the sacred and the arena of human activity. The question then is not whether modernity means a decline of religion, but rather how modern institutions negotiate this decline differently. Gauchet continues,

In actual fact, such a joining of the two powers was *de jure* impossible. There would basically always be room for two independent orders of authority and two principles of sociability, each complete in its own terms, and impossible to weld together in a stable hierarchy. This is because for a Christian there cannot ultimately be only one unique order, since Jesus' god was not the totally superior being, but the absolute other. There are accordingly two spheres and two legitimacies which in principle must remain distinct.¹⁰²

The legitimacy that the reformers lent to worldly political structures and worldly vocations thus attested to the already-presumed separation of God from the sphere of the creature. Thus, for Gauchet, “was no secularization of power, but a transfusion of sacrality into politics, a unique sacrality, which arose by breaking away from its clerical form.”¹⁰³ The move toward recognizing the sacredness of every sphere of life, in other words, is not a rejection but a continuation of transcendence. What shifted was the open recognition of the division of spheres that this separated, removing consciousness one further step from the primeval desire for religious unity.

Following from this insight, Gauchet outlines the significance of the sixteenth century for modernity in the following passage:

Like it or not, we had to begin with the fact that, alongside the imperative to restore salvation's importance, there was also the terrestrial sovereign's divine legitimacy, the human community's intrinsic necessity, and the rightfulness of actively operating within the world. These could no longer be reunited by subordinating the incidental to the essential within a unique hierarchy. They had imperceptibly become two orders, each *de jure* valid in itself, and logically equivalent

¹⁰² *DW*, 133.

¹⁰³ *DW*, 158.

for this very reason. To keep them together, we had to simultaneously embrace both: we could no longer turn away from this inferior world toward eternal life, but had to devote ourselves to the fundamental hope of attaining salvation through dedicating ourselves fully to terrestrial autonomy.... This is what made the Reformation the effective inaugurating force of the modern era. It was the most explicit sign of the change that would influence the modern age's other developments: the effective dehierarchalizing and equalizing of the here-below and the beyond, which is the cornerstone of the general transformation of future human activity.¹⁰⁴

Here, in spite of his disavowals, we see the idealist trajectory of Gauchet's secularization thesis. Modern democracy is nothing new in terms of its divisions; its novelty—and the sense in which it has finally “overcome religion”—is lodged in the dispersal of sacred alterity in every sphere of life, and ultimately in every individual. According to Gauchet, “This was not a secularizing process due to the exhaustion of sacral values presumably pushed aside to make room for secular ones, but rather a sacral legitimizing of the lay sector, independent of and alongside the properly religious one.”¹⁰⁵

So while for Gauchet modernity is defined in part by the continuation of transcendence and the sacred, there is no longer a privileged sphere that to which religion functionally points—a sphere that promises the return of the unifying sacred bond. Life has become uniform in its differentiation, and the differentiation itself is the site of the sacred. “Democracy,” Gauchet writes, is “wholly different from what its instigators imagined. It was not just any regime, but one wholly coordinated with the operation of an active collective subjectivity... It was [actually] constituted not by presence but by difference. This subjectivity was not articulated by converging with the self, but by diverging from it.”¹⁰⁶ The religious impulse that once longed for dispossession is now turned toward the activity of responsibility. That is, if there is a sacred to be sought, it is sought no longer by the pursuit of participation but rather by the pursuit of rational, democratic discourse. The institutions that foster this discourse are now the locus of

¹⁰⁴ *DW*, 159.

¹⁰⁵ *DW*, 160.

¹⁰⁶ *DW*, 176.

a sacred that exists apart from Gauchet's notion of religion. In this sense, the collective body is no longer a site of participation, but is rather continually constituted by rational activity.¹⁰⁷

Gauchet's account differs from Lefort's in several crucial ways. First, where Lefort insists on the emptiness and iconoclasm of democratic power, Gauchet sees the reincorporation of that power precisely in the institutions that facilitate the practices founded upon differentiation and otherness. It is in the continuity of this visible collective "body" that the body is constantly undone and reformed through the exercise of litigation and process. A second difference, however, has to do with the ongoing role of the symbolic, and particularly the place Gauchet gives to writing and literature in relation to modern power. Where Lefort sees the sphere of the fictive as distinct from but constantly figuring and un-figuring the arrangement of democratic power, Gauchet grants to the aesthetic in general a much more oblique, yet provocative place as the one site where the function of "religion" may yet remain. We yet become dispossessed, even momentarily, by "the vertigo of the musical abyss, the poignant heights of poetry, the frantic passion of novelistic intrigue, a dreamlike absorption into the image" as well as "the open-ended attempt to evoke the other deep inside the familiar... the unfathomable "hidden world" uncovered in the midst of a landscape seen a hundred times before, the impressionists' magic revelation of the deeply hidden truth of an inhabited landscape."¹⁰⁸ The traces of religion thus remain, Gauchet writes, but always become subsumed under the constitutive intellectual awareness of differentiation—that our subjectivity stands opposed to the unity of which we momentarily experience ourselves as a part.

There are several angles from which to critique Gauchet's account. In addition to questioning the dubious boundaries affixed to his definition of religion, one might well inquire into the extent to which his understanding of religion surreptitiously determines the course of his analysis. For one, to

¹⁰⁷ See *DW*, 198.

¹⁰⁸ *DW*, 203, 204.

construct religion as a longing for unity, dependence and participation obscures the historical and political features of religion from the outset, especially the relationship between religious practices, religious forms of critique and particular political or historical anxieties. At the same time, this creates an odd bifurcation between transcendence and religion itself—one that undercuts our ability to appreciate both the way religious practices rely on forms of transcendence to bring about a change in the way the subject relates to others and the world and the way transcendence can function to situate human beings in a situation of dependence. If this is a function Gauchet recognizes as continued in modernity through aesthetic experience and literature, we surely must ask the extent to which religious rituals and textual practices effectively overlap with the sphere of the aesthetic.

Still, and perhaps paradoxically given my own objections, Gauchet's argument is valuable precisely because it recognizes and traces the way that transcendence and immanence are given together in any collective system of practice involving the self, others, and the world. In this sense, the question of meaning that so troubles Weber does not seem to trouble Gauchet. If transcendence and immanence are given together in the differentiated relationship between the subject, others, and aspects of the world, then forms of meaning are emergent from the way this differentiation is approached and engaged. This only underscores the importance of attention to ongoing religious and extra-religious practices that engage in differentiation through repetition. Given this, however, one might well wonder why Gauchet simultaneously wants to argue that the function of "religion" has ended while its traces remain visible in the aesthetic experience. Gauchet acknowledges that even in modernity, aesthetic experience confronts the self as a kind of magic, left over "from a time when the world was populated by invisible forces."¹⁰⁹ Is this experience—its desire for unity, its non-intellectualized ability to perform, even momentarily, a primordial connectivity—at the heart not only of art but of any ritualization of difference? Often, Gauchet speaks as if ritual and myth lost their

¹⁰⁹ *DW*, 204.

operativity with the beginning of religion's decline; in making this claim, however, he does not adequately account for the forms of meaning through differentiation *and participation* that remain in the very structure of transcendence and immanence that, in some respects, he narrates so well. That the aesthetic continues to educate the body, mind, and sensibility for the purposes of reason, imagination, and ultimately ethical responsibility is a possibility that could easily follow from Gauchet's argument, but that he fails to pursue in spite of his debt to Lefort.

Perhaps Gauchet has left more to religion in modernity than he admits; perhaps he has even constructed the grounds for understanding a form of religion that persists beyond the kind rejected by Lefort—the kind that is defined simply by literal belief in certain claims. Gauchet helpfully alerts us to importance of transcendence even in a scheme that has turned toward the world and the affirmation of human life. It may be that he has underestimated the way this transcendence continues to rely on forms of repetition and figuration that are not opposed to cognition, but crucially situate the cognition in relation to other forms of bodily knowledge and affection. These questions helpfully set the stage for our consideration of one last theorist of modernity, political theology, and providence who addresses the role of writing and practice in organizing modern power and governance: Giorgio Agamben.

b. Agamben

In this final part of the chapter, I will look at Agamben's recent contribution to the Schmittian conversation around political theology. While Agamben's *homo sacer* project involves many different conversations and interlocutors, he offers much to help focus a study of the political and ethical dimensions of the doctrine of providence. *The Kingdom and the Glory* (2011) offers two things in particular. First, unlike any of the contributions surveyed thus far, Agamben lifts up the doctrine of providence in particular and devotes philological and exegetical energy toward understanding the doctrine in its written complexity. Second, Agamben draws attention to two aspects of providence

which are rarely discussed but which I will later argue deeply inform the historical discourse on providence: namely, the import of providence as it relates not only to the intellectual life but to forms of embodied practice or repetitive exercise; and, related to this, he engages with the impact of providence on organizing modern forms of power.

Among his aims, Agamben wants to offer an alternate to the account of political theology provided by Carl Schmitt. Schmitt emphasizes the relationship between political and theological structures of sovereignty anchored in a decision that creates *ex nihilo*. Agamben's argument shares certain conclusions with that of Lefort. He argues that the "center" of modern political power is empty, disembodied, and in a sense symbolically constituted. Agamben, however, follows Schmitt's less-known contemporary Erik Peterson¹¹⁰ in turning from the monotheistic sovereignty to the "theological economy" of *providence* in order to analogically ground the structure of modern power. To construct the argument, Agamben works from two angles. First, he locates and re-reads early Christian theological writings that deal with a fundamental problematic of Trinitarian theology, namely how one is able to account for the aseity (self-existence, un-caused nature) of divine power and the nature of its administration with respect to the immanent order. Agamben argues that the shape of this Trinitarian argument came, over subsequent centuries, to fund a large-scale theory of providential administration and ultimately to map the workings of economic and administrative organization in modernity. Second, Agamben grounds his argument on certain methodological commitments that further distinguish him from the authors we have surveyed so far. He presents his method most clearly in a separate compilation of essays, *The Signature of All Things* (2008). In what follows, I will highlight the aspects of Agamben's work that contribute most clearly to my work. After outlining the steps of his argument

¹¹⁰ Erik Peterson was a contemporary and interlocutor of Carl Schmitt who critiqued the notion that any kind of monotheism could be derived from Christianity, and emphasized instead the importance of the Trinity as leading to a kind of political economy. For more on this debate, see György Geréby's "Political Theology versus Theological Politics: Erik Peterson and Carl Schmitt." See also Agamben's discussion of Peterson in *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 7-16.

about providence and its relation to modern governance, I will turn my attention to Agamben's methodology and finally assess his argument in relation to the themes I have collected in preparation for a reading of Calvin.

Agamben's argument begins with an insight that is now familiar: many theological treatments of divine sovereignty are concerned to show not merely *that* God is sovereign, but also how divine sovereignty becomes active in relation to human beings and the order of things. He emphasizes, in particular, that activity refers to a different sense of knowing than that which claims knowledge of God's being in a theoretical sense. This form of knowing related to activity is often linked, in both classical and early Christian sources, to the activity of *oikonomia*—the ordering of the household. For example, Agamben argues that in the writing of Marcus Aurelius, "*Oikonomia* designates a practice and a non-epistemic knowledge that should be assessed only in the context of the aims that they pursue, even if, in themselves, they may appear to be inconsistent with the good."¹¹¹ He then traces the term's reiteration in the New Testament letter to the Ephesians, where it is used to refer to the activity performed by the historical incarnation of Christ: "God has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his benevolence, which he set forth in Christ for the *oikonomia* of the fullness of time, to unite all things in him" (Eph. 1:9-10). Agamben glosses this as follows:

Paul is here speaking about the election and redemption decided by God according to his benevolence: consistently with this context, he can write that God has assigned to the Messiah the *oikonomia* of the fullness of time, bringing to completion the promise of redemption. Even here *oikonomia* simply refers to an activity, and not to a "divine design of salvation".... The fact that Paul is able to present the attainment of the promised redemption in terms of an *oikonomia*—that is, the fulfillment of a task of domestic administration—is far from irrelevant.¹¹²

¹¹¹ Agamben, *KG*, 19.

¹¹² *KG*, 23.

For Agamben, this Trinitarian division between a transcendent plan and earthly activity points not only to a division between the being and activity of the divine, but also to the activity of administration to figure the divine being itself.

Agamben's philological study contends that sovereignty has consistently been given in providential-administrative terms.¹¹³ His thesis, however, goes one step further, arguing that in practice, the providential-administrative has actually displaced the centrality of the sovereign-political.¹¹⁴ In other words, inasmuch as the ultimately transcendent being of God comes to be figured by the active providential activity of ongoing immanent administration—dispensed through various ontologically-distinct mediators—any continuous relationship between the eternal principle and the earthly order is, at the very least, called into question. That is, if the transcendent principle is inaccessible apart from the immanent order, then the matter of the legitimacy of various immanent orders takes on the character of a perpetual question without a definitive answer.¹¹⁵

At this point, it is possible to observe the reiteration of two now-familiar themes: first, the tension between human dependence on and activity with respect to the immanent sphere; and second, the need for symbolic resources to frame the relationship between the immanent order and its transcendent possibilities. Agamben continues to follow these thematic threads by turning to several early Christian texts.¹¹⁶ For example, he examines a passage from Augustine's *De Genesi Ad Litteram* in

¹¹³ *KG*, 43.

¹¹⁴ This claim entails an ontological break, which Agamben argues (perhaps less persuasively) is written into Trinitarian theology itself, between the ontology of the Father who reigns and the Son who rules through administration. It has been argued by Devin Singh that Agamben over-reads the significance of the *anarchos* of the son in early Christian texts. See his forthcoming article, "Anarchy, Void, Signature: Agamben's Trinitarian Economy," under review by *Political Theology*.

¹¹⁵ *KG*, 67.

¹¹⁶ The following are among the patristic texts Agamben examines in *The Kingdom and the Glory*: Gregory of Nazianzus, *Select Orations*; Origen, *De Principiis*; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*; Tertullian, *Treatise Against Praxeas* and *Adversus Marcionem*; Clement of Alexandria, *The Clementine Homilies* and *Exhortation to the Heathen*; Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel* and *Letter of Eusebius of Caesarea to the People of his Diocese*.

which Augustine responds to the question of the origin of categories of order, quality and quantity by relating these to the *activity* of the divine being, but still allows that they inhere within the creation itself. Agamben interprets this passage to underscore the tension at play in attempts to maintain a distinction between God's being and God's work:

God is, in his own being, *ordo*, order. And yet he cannot be measure, number, and order in the sense in which these terms define the order of created things. God is, in himself, *extra ordinem*, or rather, he is order only in the sense of an *ordering* and *arranging*, that is, not in the sense of a substance, but in that of an activity.... The being of God, as order, is structurally *ordinatio*, that is, praxis of government and activity that arranges according to measure, number, and weight. It is in this sense that the *dispositio* (which we should not forget is the Latin translation of *oikonomia*) of things in the order means nothing else but the *dispositio* of things in God himself. Immanent and transcendent order once again refer back to one another in a paradoxical coincidence, which can nevertheless be understood only as a perpetual *oikonomia*, as a continuous activity of government of the world, one that implies a fracture between being and praxis and, at the same time, tries to heal it.¹¹⁷

While this argument bears some relevance to Gauchet's argument—especially in Gauchet's characterization of the activity of the medieval church as an attempt to constantly re-stitch immanence and transcendence—Agamben makes a more expansive argument. He suggests that governmental order in the West *in general* has been constituted by these basic terms—by the suggestion that order somehow exists in transcendent being, but that this being itself is only realized in immanent activity. This, against the grain of the traditional theological articulations, places the priority on immanence rather than transcendence.¹¹⁸

Still, Agamben recognizes that for the immanent order to function meaningfully—for it to not lapse into a disordered chaos of events—it needs to be coordinated with the transcendence from which it is fractured. Here, the doctrine of providence rises to the foreground of his account. "Government," he writes, "presents itself as an activity that can be thought only if ontology and praxis are divided and

¹¹⁷ KG, 89. Emphases in original.

¹¹⁸ It once again relies on Agamben's argument concerning the *anarchos* of the Son. But even if this is ultimately an unpersuasive argument from the patristic texts, Calvin's insistence upon an ontological difference between Creator and creation may reiterate aspects of Agamben's argument.

coordinated ‘economically.’ In this sense, we can say that the doctrine of providence is the privileged theoretical field in which the classical vision of the world, with its primacy of being over praxis, begins to crack.”¹¹⁹ Interestingly, providence becomes so crucial because it bears the weight of a transition which, although phrased differently in Agamben’s account, is strikingly similarly to the difference between the two notions of meaning that I differentiated earlier—meaning linked to intention, and meaning linked to signification and differentiation. Where providence once could constitute meaning within immanence by positing a direct relation of intentionality stemming from a hierarchy of being, providence as a discourse bears the weight of a transition toward meaning stemming from the order (*oikonomia* or *dispositio*, to use the terminology Agamben extracts from his theological sources) of immanence. In other words, Agamben’s thesis attempts to account for a transition *from* a notion of meaning as derived from a transcendent intention *to* a notion of meaning as an order of immanent arrangement through activity.

Agamben then maps this onto the more traditional language of “general” versus “special” providence. He provides a working definition of the distinction in the following passage:

It has often been noted that one of the crucial points of the dispute on providence concerned, from the very beginning, the distinction between general and particular (or special) providence. At its base lies the stoic distinction between that which can be found in the primary way in the plans of providence and that which is rather produced as a concomitant or secondary effect of it. The history of the concept of providence coincides with the long and fierce debate between those who claimed that God provides for the world only by means of general or universal principles and those who argued that the divine providence extends to particular things—according to the image in Matthew 10:29, down to the lowliest sparrow.¹²⁰

General providence thus coincides with an order for the world grounded outside the temporal and contingent workings of the world—in universal laws or a transcendentally created order of operations.

Special providence, on the other hand, transplants transcendence into the world alongside the activity

¹¹⁹ KG, 113.

¹²⁰ KG, 113.

of immanent things. Because of its particular relationship to immanent events, special providence is the form of providential governance that has most often been seen as a threat to human freedom—one in which God intervenes in the world and overrides the intentions of human actors. Agamben writes, however, that human freedom is not primarily at stake with respect to special providence; after all, special providence engages with, and thus validates concrete human activity. What is at stake is rather the very possibility of divine governance at all. Without special providence, there is no active ordering of the world, only an impotent, removed form of sovereignty.

With active ordering, however, human activity paradoxically becomes itself constitutive of divine power. In Agamben's words,

Through the distinction between legislative or sovereign power and executive or governmental power, the modern State acquires the double structure of the governmental machine. At each turn, it wears the regal clothes of providence, which legislates in a transcendent and universal way, but lets the creatures it looks after be free, and the sinister ministerial clothes of fate, which carries out in detail the providential dictates and confines the reluctant individuals within the implacable connection between the immanent causes and between the effects that their very nature has contributed to determining. The providential-economical paradigm is, in this sense, the paradigm of democratic power, just as the theological-political is the paradigm of absolutism.¹²¹

For most of the authors discussed in this chapter, the activity of providence is constituted inferentially from the logic of sovereignty. Even for Weber, predestination functions as a doctrine that reveals the tension between an absent sovereign and the concerns of immanent life. Here, however, Agamben argues that providence is fundamentally designed to account for a distance, even an absence that is part and parcel of the logic of sovereignty itself. If sovereignty has an empty center, then providence has developed as a discourse that must account for both sides of this vacuity: first, the aspect through which the world is received as larger than the sum of its activity (or the sense in which the world has an origin

¹²¹ KG, 142.

ex nihilo); and second, the aspect through which the world becomes what it is through deliberate activity (the sense in which the world is itself arranged into a certain order following from its creation).

Agamben's concerns about the relationship between the providential paradigm, sovereignty, and the modern procedural state has thus brought us to line of inquiry similar to what we have seen in Kantorowicz, Lefort, Gauchet, and even Weber. That is, Agamben is interested in the *effect* of claims about sovereignty or providence on the way human activity is structured in a fundamental sense. He wants to know how the shifting symbolic relationship between transcendence and immanence variously funds operations of reason and power in modernity. This is a continuation of Weber's concern for the tension between individual meaning and the ever-expanding horizon of generalized progress—a tension perhaps most simply and compellingly figured in Kantorowicz' study of the two bodies of the king. On the one hand, the modern turn toward immanence and scientific knowledge draws attention to material life in its particularity—to “special” activity. On the other hand, the precise form of this special activity as a rationalization of life functions to draw those very lives into a machine of perpetual progress—one that Agamben here will call the providential machine, the “sinister ministerial clothes of fate” that employ deliberating and active lives toward aims that exceed them.

At this juncture, however, the relative novelty of Agamben's contribution is also apparent. Where others incorporate modern power into the sovereign decision (Schmitt) or related political institutions (Gauchet), or perhaps attempt to reconstitute modern power through the disincorporation of the symbolic (Lefort), Agamben follows the invitation latent in Kantorowicz' work and hones in on practices of *acclamation* as that through which modern power becomes operative. Here, unlike someone like Gauchet who insists that the participatory aspect of religion no longer carries force in modernity, Agamben makes the astute move of connecting doctrine to liturgy, theology to worship.¹²²

¹²² In a certain respect, this follows from his argument that providential activity is more fundamental than theoretical sovereignty. This logic will become more clear in the next chapter when I argue that the discourse on providence has been one in which ritualized practice is connected to, or even undergirds the use of argument.

He argues that that which is animated through liturgical acts of acclamation—namely, the *glorification* of power—is precisely *what* operates at the intersection of theology and politics.

This deactivates the question of whether theology or politics is in fact primary.¹²³ Both theology and politics are *performed together* in the acclamation of glory. According to Agamben,

Theology and politics are, in this sense, what results from the exchange and from the movement of something like an absolute garment that, as such, has decisive juridical-political implications. Like many of the concepts we have encountered in our investigation, this garment of glory is a signature that marks bodies and substances politically and theologically, and orientates and displaces them according to an economy that we are only now beginning to glimpse.¹²⁴

Like Lefort, Agamben argues that modern governance is, at the center, inoperative or ontologically empty. With the turn to the category of “glory,” and the practices that perform glorification through acclamation, Agamben turns to more than the “merely” symbolic or the aesthetic sphere to account for the disposition of bodies into active political and bureaucratic formations. He is, in a sense, providing a robust account of something like a meaning that relies upon acts of signification rather than transcendent intentionality in order to obtain.

This becomes clearer when we unpack just what “glory” *is*—both within his account, and within the biblical and Christian theological traditions where it paradoxically serves as a sign of both God’s presence and absence. Agamben writes that glory figures God in a way that theology never can, precisely because theological argument can never truly unite the founding split between who God is *in se* and who God is *ad extra*. Any tangible evidence of this accomplishment comes not in intellectual satisfaction, but in the acclamation of praise. In this sense, glory is both a subject and an object—that is, it exists both as the activity of glorification that coincides with the existence of glory itself.¹²⁵ It is thus

¹²³ See discussion of the debate between Carl Schmitt and Jan Assmann. *KG*, 193.

¹²⁴ *KG*, 194.

¹²⁵ *KG*, 200.

fundamentally theatrical and performative. Yet it is not depoliticized as in Gauchet's account, and given a separate sphere; for Agamben, glory is actualized in political arrangements and activities.¹²⁶

Perhaps most interestingly, however, glory is a thing without mass: it is an activity involving signification through acts of arranging and attributing, acts that reorient things without adding anything substantially to the sum of their parts.

Agamben describes this with particular clarity in one passage:

The operation of glory—or at least its pretension—is to express the pleromatic figure of the trinity, in which economic trinity and immanent trinity are once and for all securely articulated together. But it can only fulfill this task by continuously dividing what it must conjoin and each time conjoining what must remain separated. For this reason, just as in the profane sphere glory was an attribute, not of Government but of the Kingdom... so the doxology refers ultimately to the being of God, not to his economy. And yet, just as we have seen that the Kingdom is nothing but that which remains if one removes Government, and the Government is that which remains if the Kingdom removes itself, in such a way that the governmental machine always consists in the articulation of these two polarities, equally, one could say that the theodoxological machine results from the correlation between immanent trinity and economy trinity, in which each of these two aspects glorifies the other and stems from the other. Government glorifies the Kingdom, and Kingdom glorifies the Government.¹²⁷

Glory therefore establishes the active relation between the immanent order and the presumption of a sovereign authority whose will is enacted by means of these intermediaries, whose general providence is specially applied and therefore activated. For Agamben, however, that sovereign authority is constantly deferred by the working of the government itself which is constituted by (and reciprocally constitutes) *not* a separate sphere of power, but *glory*. So Agamben concludes, "But the center of the machine is empty, and glory is nothing but the splendor that emanates from this emptiness, the inexhaustible *kabhod* [glory] that at once reveals and veils the central vacuity of the machine."¹²⁸

¹²⁶ *KG*, 208-9.

¹²⁷ *KG*, 211.

¹²⁸ *KG*, 211.

Glory thus repeats the activity generated by providence, but with respect to the order of governmental power. Just as Agamben thinks that theological accounts of God's being came to depend on the activity of God dispensed through the Son, through the providential machine, and ultimately through human intermediaries, glory is generated by the Son who praises the Father. The governmental machine is thus maintained and activated—made coherent in the absence of sovereignty—through a perpetual liturgy of acclamation. According to Agamben, "Perhaps glorification is not only that which best fits the glory of God but is itself, as effective rite, what produces glory; and if glory is the very substance of God and the true sense of his economy, then it depends upon glorification in an essential manner and, therefore, has good reason to demand it through reproaches and injunctions."¹²⁹ Inasmuch as the demand and the dependency coincide, however, that which constitutes the substance of God and God's economy aligns into emptiness:

At the point where it perfectly coincides with glory, praise is without content: it culminates in the *amen* that says nothing but merely assents to and concludes what has already been said.... The hymn is the radical deactivation of signifying language, the word rendered completely inoperative and, nevertheless, retained as such in the form of liturgy.¹³⁰

Glory is therefore activated through the praise that points to, and thus constitutes, the center of power through the performance itself. It is thus fundamentally emergent from a certain act of signification—of naming and attribution—and completed when that which is glorified and the acclamation of the glorified become tautological. When signification is iterated without difference through praise, it is thus completed and deactivated.

To return to the realm of modern politics, Agamben needs only to return to Schmitt. For while Schmitt's political theology emphasizes the political structure of sovereign decisionism at the center of democratic power, he also provides—if somewhat dismissively—an account of the glorification of the

¹²⁹ *KG*, 226.

¹³⁰ *KG*, 236-7.

people. If Agamben's reorientation of political theology around the category of providence calls a reader's attention to the primacy of activity with relation to being, then this reorientation similarly flips Schmitt's argument. Where Schmitt sees the people as a sort of aftereffect of sovereign power and one subject to manipulation, Agamben pinpoints the primary importance of public opinion, democratic action, and especially the media as contemporary forms of acclamation that themselves both reveal and reinforce the inoperativity at the center of the governmental "machine."¹³¹

Agamben's project thus provides a compelling re-articulation of the larger conversation around theology and modernity that we have been tracing in this chapter. At times, he over-reaches. His reading of the anarchic division between the Father and Son, for example, is theologically dubious with respect to the written source material. He also under-reaches. There is, for example, no discussion in the book of the role of the Spirit, in spite of Agamben's repeated references to the Trinity. But what Agamben offers that I find particularly valuable has to do with the methodological commitments that provide a compelling account for the interrelation of the theological, political, and practical within the discourse on providence.

In conclusion, I will say a little more about Agamben's methodological commitments and what distinguishes them from others who have discussed providence in the orbit of secularization. Unlike many of the other authors who relate providence to the intellectual life and politics of modernity, Agamben offers neither an argument of substantial continuity between theology and modernity (Schmitt, Löwith) nor a subtractionary secularization thesis (Marx, Weber, and in some sense Blumenberg). He argues, rather, that providence should be viewed as a "signature" that marks concepts and enables their movement from one sphere to another. To understand the force of this claim, it is helpful to draw briefly from Agamben's collection of essays, *The Signature of All Things*. There, Agamben argues for an understanding of the human sciences as constituted by a movement not from

¹³¹ KG, 254-6.

the universal to the particular nor the particular to the universal, but rather from particulars to other particulars. What this means is that the scholarly practices that operate at the divide between reader and writing—or subject and object more generally—should call into question the very coherence of these distinctions. In a practical sense, this means employing close readings and attention to detail instead of relying on abstractions or generalizations, and thus asking the objects themselves to enter a subjective relation to the reader while simultaneously recognizing that the reader and text exist together as objects.¹³²

Agamben therefore argues that the knowledge sought through the human sciences emerges from a reading practice that recognizes the unbridgeability of the gap between subjects and objects, past and present, text and life, but operates in this very gap. Within this practice, a signature is a kind of particular that is studied objectively and thus becomes illuminative of the way particulars relate to particulars—between texts and other texts, texts and historical circumstances, and the context of the reading subject.¹³³ Agamben writes that signatures

¹³² Agamben speaks most clearly about this at the conclusion of the first essay in *The Signature of All Things*, titled “What is a Paradigm?”:

If one asks whether the paradigmatic character lies in things themselves or in the mind of the inquirer, my response must be that the question itself makes no sense. The intelligibility in question in the paradigm has an ontological character. It refers not to the cognitive relation between subject and object but to being. There is, then, a paradigmatic ontology. And I know of no better definition of it than the one contained in a poem by Wallace Stevens titled “Description Without Place”:

It is possible that to seem—it is to be,
As the sun is something seeming and it is.

The sun is an example. What it seems
It is and in such seeming all things are (32).

The force of this claim seems to lie in Agamben’s resistance to limiting something’s objective reality to a specific kind of scientific account, but extending its truth to the effects that it exerts in relation to other things.

¹³³ In Agamben’s own view, the theory of signatures to which he ascribes differs from Derrida in that Agamben insists upon the primacy of the signature over the sign. Where he accuses Derrida of isolating signatures, insisting upon the auto-signification of the signature such that it merely gestures to its own displacement and deferral, Agamben insists (invoking Foucault) that the self-referential quality of the signature actually founds resemblances between things (ST, 77-8).

do not institute semiotic relations or create new meanings; instead, they mark and 'characterize' signs at the level of their existence, thus actualizing and displacing their efficacy. These are the signatures that signs receive from the sheer fact of existing and being used—namely, the indelible character that, in marking them as signifying something, orients and determines their interpretation and efficacy in a certain context. Like signatures on coins, like the figures of the constellations and the decans in the sky of astrology... or the character that baptism imprints on the soul of the baptized, they have always already pragmatically decided the destiny and life of signs that neither semiology nor hermeneutics is able to exhaust.¹³⁴

This reading practice thus attends to the disposition of signs that marks them across relations of difference. In tracing the theory of signatures back to magical, early scientific, astrological and sacramental origins, Agamben variously describes signatures as that which makes signs intelligible, as a sign with its own cause and effect, as that which allows for resemblances, as a sign that denotes itself, and as a sign within a sign.¹³⁵ It resists any tendency toward using binary logic, but itself exists in a “force field traversed by polar tensions,” a field in which the “magical” relations between particulars may become mutually illuminating not only across particular texts and historical circumstances but to the self and in the present.¹³⁶

At one point in his essay on signatures, Agamben discusses the topic of secularization as itself a signature. This is useful to examine not only as a topic relevant to this study, but as an example of how Agamben thinks that signatures function. He writes,

In the human sciences, too, we may at times deal with concepts that in actuality are signatures. One such concept is secularization, about which in the mid-1960s in Germany there was a sharp debate that involved figures like Hans Blumenberg, Karl Löwith, and Carl Schmitt. The discussion was vitiated by the fact that none of the participants seemed to realize that “secularization” was not a concept, in which the “structural identity” between theological and

¹³⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *The Signature of All Things* (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 2009), 64.

¹³⁵ *ST*, 42, 47, 57, 58, 59. Agamben links the theory of signatures to Paracelsus, Henry More, Jakob Boehme, and links it less directly to Thomas Aquinas' view of the sacraments, among others.

¹³⁶ *ST*, 19, 20, 31-2. Agamben links signatures to magic in part because of the history of the theory of signatures from which he draws, tracing back to the early modern association between interpretation, science, astrology, and alchemy. As a concept, however, signatures are linked to magic in the sense of positing a relationship between things that is not activated by a recognizable mediation such as a law. Instead, the signature is a term for something in signs themselves that makes them efficacious. See 42-3, 50.

political conceptuality (Schmitt's thesis) or the discontinuity between Christian theology and modernity (this was Blumenberg's thesis *contra* Löwith) was in question. Rather, secularization was a strategic operator that marked political concepts in order to make them refer to their theological origins. To put it differently: secularization acts within the conceptual system of modernity as a signature, which refers it back to theology. Just as, according to canon law, the priest reduced to a secular status had to bear a sign of the order to which he had belonged, so the "secularized" concept shows its past in the theological sphere as a signature. Secularization, then, is a signature that marks or exceeds a sign or concept in order to refer it to a specific interpretation or to a specific sphere without, however, leaving it in order to constitute a new concept or new meaning. What is really at stake in the (ultimately political) debate that has engaged scholars from Max Weber's time to the present can be understood only if we grasp the signatory character of secularization.¹³⁷

What is at stake, as *The Kingdom and the Glory* shows, is the way in which the signs disposed in historical texts mutually constitute the present arrangement of power. This illumines why the question of the relationship of theology to political order keeps recurring, even with added urgency, and why there is so often an unsatisfying solution to the problem when it is viewed in binary terms. What is at stake, then, for Agamben, is our relation as subjects to life itself and the structures and patterns through which life is meaningfully engaged.

It may be useful at this point to connect this argument to several issues that have been lurking across this chapter and which will recur at times in subsequent chapters. First, Agamben's discussion of signatures offers an interesting argument for how the aesthetic functions with respect to the shape of modern political/economic imagination. By giving attention to how theological signatures do not only bring their own organization but perform the arrangement of signs, Agamben treats theology differently than either Weber or Gauchet. Rather than merely looking at theology as a fixed set of doctrines or as providing symbolic resources for imagining the transcendent structure of politics, Agamben suggests that democratic political power itself is substantiated through the aesthetic activity of acclamation. Second, in a deeper sense, Agamben offers a compelling argument for how reading and writing—and

¹³⁷ ST, 76-7.

particularly the exercise of reading historical documents well—allows us to better understand ourselves in relation to our present, and perhaps to think our life differently.

Agamben, however, does not address the period that will ultimately be under consideration here: the Protestant Reformation. Aside from a few passing references to Luther, this crucial period in the transition from the Middle Ages to modernity goes completely unmentioned, as does any reference to Calvin's reforms and their relation to modern governmentality. One way of thinking about what follows is that it will be an exploration of the particular disposition of the signature of providence in the writing of Calvin. To the extent that Calvin's *Institutes* are read alongside Agamben's argument, we will find that Calvin's view of providence calls several of Agamben's claims into question. For one, we will find a different relation between the *polis* and the *oikos*, power and order, the kingdom and the glory, the Father and the Son, and the will and providence, and even special and general providence than those which Agamben articulates. We will also find, however, a strong emphasis on several of the categories that Agamben does emphasize over against his fellow theorists of providence and secularization: particularly the notion of providence as a discourse within a field of practice, and the relationship between providence as involving practices of attribution that are connected to practices of acclamation. Put another way, providence involves practices of organizing the world through naming that orient one toward receiving and revealing the glory of God. In this way, Agamben's theoretical work prepares one to notice the significance of the relationship between providence and glory in ways that have been overlooked by many of Calvin's previous interpreters.

The remainder of these chapters will also be responsive to the wider array of authors. With Nietzsche and Weber, I will carry forward the question of meaning, and particularly how meaning is constituted in Calvin's understanding of providence. What is the relationship between meaning, the will of God, the immanent world, and human practices with respect to both the will of God and the immanent world? With Lefort and Gauchet, I will remain attuned to how transcendence and

immanence are related in Calvin's work. And with all of these authors alongside Schmitt and Kantorowicz, I will look at the relationship between providence and politics, and to the way the incarnation and ascension of Christ reiterates the problem of the two bodies of the king at the heart of the operation of political power.

As Agamben has particularly noted, however, these readings of political theology are enabled by close readings of theological writing. To use Agamben's terms, if one is to perceive and articulate the movement of a signature from particular to particular, one must first understand the shape of that signature in its particular written disposition. The ability to grasp both the iteration and novelty of Calvin's arguments about providence—or any argument about providence—will be greatly enhanced by devoting further attention to the earlier history of the discourse on providence. I will argue that this discourse has always foregrounded a number of political, ethical, and individual material concerns that dovetail in interesting ways to the questions noted by the authors in this chapter. So before turning to Calvin's writing, in the next chapter I turn back to the philosophical and theological discourse on providence that precedes its association with divine intentionality.

Chapter 2

Reading the Discourse on Providence: Early Writings and Practices

Lars von Trier's 2011 film *Melancholia*¹ portrays the final minutes of the earth's existence. As a stray planet barrels toward earth, with no human power capable of halting or diverting its progress, the film takes care to assure us that we cannot find easy meaning in the hope of alien life elsewhere in the universe. The earth is quite singular in that regard, and soon it will be gone.

Before the final scene fades to black, the viewer is invited to bear the weight of human emotions elicited in the face such a catastrophe—emotions both rare yet eerily familiar. With the film's characters, we face the fear of uncertainty, the anxiety of the suggestion that the end of our life may be sooner than we hope. When for a brief moment it seems that the imposing planet will not collide with earth after all, we join in the elation of an end deferred—a negative test result, as it were, merely postponing the inevitability of death. In the end, however, that hope proves false. As the planet looms ever larger in the sky, viewers experience a vicarious taste of that most singular of emotions: the fever pitch distention of time before an end that is helplessly inevitable and impending.

Melancholia thus allows its viewers to face the possibility of an end to end all ends: an utter end with no “yet” to follow. And in doing so, it invites us to consider the following question: what meaning may be had in dying a good death which no one will witness and no one will remember? For example, in such a circumstance, could we even retain the appropriate ethical tools to adjudicate whether suicide is prudent or cowardly? Could we test the abiding merit of pleasure over solemnity or of obliviousness over attention? Will it matter, if there is no final accounting?

The film does not purport to answer these questions. It does, however, place before us a

¹ Lars von Trier, *Melancholia*. Film. Directed by Lars von Trier (Denmark: Meta Louise Foldager, Louise Vesth, 2011).

curiously under-interpreted display of final activity on the part of the film's remaining characters. As the foreboding planet bears down, they assemble for themselves a small structure—a "cave" of unfastened, neatly balanced whittled² sticks—under which they proceed to take communal refuge. Looking into one another's faces and surrounded by the structure marking their boundaries, they keep fear at bay even as death encroaches (see figure two). Theirs is a ritualized work given singular meaning by its attention to unstoppable necessity—a meaning, like the characters themselves, momentarily contained in one earthen vessel destined to turn to dust.



Figure 2: *Melancholia* (2011)

In this chapter, I will begin my discussion of the doctrine of providence again, this time from a different angle. By looking at several much older, written articulations of providence from the philosophical schools to early and medieval Christian texts, I want to argue that the extreme case presented in this scene, these emotions, and this activity have an enormous amount to do with the history of the philosophical and theological discourse around divine providence. That is, I want to argue

² See also the following works of art: Albrecht Dürer *Melancholia I* (1514) copperplate (Städelsches Kunstinstitut und Städtische Galerie, Frankfurt); and three by Lucas Cranach the Elder: *An Allegory of Melancholy* (1528) oil on panel (National Gallery of Scotland); *Die Melancholie* (1532) oil on panel (Musée d'Unterlinden, Colmar, France); and *Melancholie* (1532) oil on panel (Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen, Denmark). These four depictions of melancholy draw out the dimensions of the figurations in this final film scene—apocalypse, stillness, practice, and images of ritualized whittling. In part because they place this conversation in the 16th century—the time period of ultimate focus in this larger project—it would be helpful to analyze these connections explicitly in a larger project.

that providence is a discourse that has often emerged precisely when the living face death. Additionally, as the term “discourse” has come to suggest,³ providence has to do with much more than mere philosophical reasoning or argumentation. It is a term in an argument that is taken up in a larger activity of living, relating, and preparing that involves—but is not reducible to—its claims, reasons, and argumentation. Fundamentally, such claims function in the service of shaping a subject’s attitudes, practices, and beliefs in a way that is most fitting for the living of *this* life, facing *this* death.

As I have suggested already, the term “providence” occurs with less frequency today than in the past. In chapter one, I looked at one enclave of thought where providence remains a topic of interest. In this chapter, my aim is to remember the aspects of the doctrine that exceed the attention of many of the theorists surveyed in chapter one (with the possible exception of Weber and Nietzsche). That is, I want to remember the deeply human concerns that surround this ancient category. Like some of the authors in chapter one have noted, this involves giving renewed attention to the way writing in particular adjudicates the way lives are shaped ethically, aesthetically, and politically. To better grasp the role that providence has played in shaping patterns of life in the modern West, and to perhaps grasp overlooked dimensions of the role providence may continue to play in the present—albeit under different names and arrangements—it is important to read for more than isolated arguments. One must instead squint to see the knots and whittle marks inscribed upon those classic arguments. That is, one must become attuned to ways of reading these arguments as components of the ritualized work of building, discerning in them a structural function carefully assembled to prepare the self for worldly life before death.

³ In using this term, I intentionally reference Foucault’s well known use of the term as a network of references made stable and altered through performance. See, e.g., Michel Foucault, *Archeology of Knowledge* (UK: Routledge, 2002), 28-ff, 50-51.

The larger aim of this chapter is to continue to prepare a reading of Calvin's 1559 *Institutes on the Christian Religion*.⁴ As I have already noted, Calvin's strong emphasis on providence in terms of an active will ordering immanent events is well known by reputation, and seems largely in keeping with Protestant reformers' characteristic emphasis on the freedom and omnipotence of God. Less attention has been paid, however, to the ethical and practical dimensions of Calvin's view in continuity and contrast with the ethical and practical dimensions of earlier writings on providence.⁵ In addition to shedding some additional light to the nature of the sixteenth-century shifts in the European discourse on nature, will, and knowledge, I anticipate that such a study will also prepare for a reading of Calvin's work as participating as it does in the broader framework of the activity of providence that shapes one's life in the world through writing.

In order to better approach Calvin's particular treatment of providence, however, it is necessary to position it with respect to a framework shaped by the features of the larger discourse. In this chapter, I will begin to develop such a framework by looking closely at several sets of writings from well before the sixteenth century that have variously contributed to the discourse of providence. Or, in Agamben's terminology, I will look at writings on providence that help to cultivate an understanding of how the "signature" of providence disposes different kinds of meaningful activities across time and context through engagement with particular texts.⁶ These texts will be read in order to gather features and particular areas of problematization common to the developing and shifting discourse. Throughout, I will further the claim that understanding arguments about providence requires attending to the larger

⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. McNeill, trans. Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960).

⁵ It is widely recognized that Calvin was versed in classical and early Christian sources by way of his humanist university training. What is less recognized is the influence of earlier forms of writing and pedagogy on Calvin's own writing and pedagogy. For some foundational studies in Calvin's intellectual training, see Charles Partee, *Calvin and Classical Philosophy* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), and David Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁶ See chapter two and Agamben's *The Signature of All Things*.

frameworks—animated in part through the particularity of the text—through which the meaning of providence has been activated. My analysis of the historic texts, therefore, will seek to establish both a) the nature of the so-called “ritual practices”⁷ intertwined with argumentation on providence, and b) the nature of the concerns that repeatedly elicit and drive the act of writing on providence. Ultimately, this will yield an approach to providence that emphasizes the inseparability of practice, argument, and the embodied human questions that elicit both.

I. Approaching Providence as an Activity

In chapter one, I argued that the attention to providence that has so far been given by theorists of secularization and political theology calls for a closer look at the particular shape of different views of providence. Carl Schmitt’s political theology, for example, relies on one particular notion of sovereignty strongly influenced by nominalism’s emphasis on divine otherness; similarly, Max Weber’s thesis on the Protestant ethic relies on a post-Calvinian version of predestination that emphasizes its absoluteness and its opacity. These particular versions of sovereignty and predestination draw from visible strands of thinking and writing about providence in medieval and early modern Europe—strands that emphasize and defend the axiomatic status of divine power, freedom and goodness in relation to the world’s events.⁸ They are not, however, the only prominent forms of argumentation on providence. My aim in

⁷ By invoking the terms “ritual” and “practice,” I do not have one fixed definition in mind but rather mean to reference several features commonly associated with both. These include: repetition; enacted relation to mythical and otherwise constructed structures of meaning; acts and relationships aimed at refiguring of human subjectivity through the devices of repetition or mythical participation; enactment of varied temporal and spatial frameworks; and finally, writing that performs structured relations through genre and devices including prayer, dialogue, personal practice, and correspondence.

⁸ One might call this the deductive approach to providence, as it is an approach that takes God’s sovereignty as axiomatic and then deduces certain propositions and religious commitments from that axiom. Such arguments are common in recent centuries, especially in Reformed theology. For one example, see the recent *Four Views on Divine Providence*, ed. Dennis W. Jowers (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), published by Zondervan and aimed at an educated popular audience. Paul Kjos Helseth summarizes what he calls “the Reformed view” as follows, first citing Princeton Seminary’s Benjamin B. Warfield (1851-1921):

this chapter is to retrieve other formulations of providence. I begin with a brief look at several other recent attempts by scholars to similarly remember the more complicated history of providence.

Philosopher Genevieve Lloyd's recent book, *Providence Lost* (2008), offers an intellectual history that privileges the question of precisely what it was that the classical discourse on providence *did*—and whether we still feel its impact, or the impact of its absence, today. In her introduction, Lloyd writes as follows:

Providence may now be largely “lost” from our secular consciousness; but it continues to exert an influence on our thought and on our lives. My intention is not to argue for a revival of providence—either by reasserting the importance of religion or by attempting to develop an alternative secular version of providence. The guiding conviction informing the book is simply that a better understanding of this largely forgotten strand in the history of Western thought can throw some light on the functioning—and increasingly the malfunctioning—of familiar ideas of free will, autonomy, and responsibility that we now so readily take as defining our modernity.⁹

Lloyd's present interest in providence, like that of many of the authors discussed in the previous chapter, stems from the recognition that providence functioned in the past to enact forms of meaning and configure various kinds of relationships between human life, nature, and the divine that have been

According to those in [the Reformed] wing of [the Augustinian] tradition, “There is nothing that comes to pass that [God] has not first decreed and then brought to pass by His creation or providence.” As B. B. Warfield makes clear in his essays on the doctrines of providence and predestination, the God of Reformed believers is no mere “godling” that is subject to forces acting “independently... and outside of his teleological control”.... Reformed believers conclude that “all things without exception... are disposed by Him, and His will is the ultimate account of all that occurs. Heaven and earth and all that is in them are the instruments through which He works His ends. Nature, nations, and the fortunes of the individual alike present in all their changes the transcript of His purpose (27, 29; Warfield citations are taken from B. B. Warfield's essays, “Some Thoughts on Predestination,” in *Shorter Writings*, ed. John E. Meeter, 2 vols., [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001], 9, 45; and “Predestination,” in *Biblical Doctrines*, vol. 2 of *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991], 9).

Here, the top-down orientation of providence could hardly be more exaggerated—a feature which bears consequences on the way human beings know and understand the force of providence. The roots of this are apparent in a number of arguments about providence related to the Reformation traditions. For example, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1647) presents providence as an objective account of God's divine power with little reference to how the doctrine is to be received or put into practice on the part of the believer. An earlier Reformed writing which displays this kind of argument can also be found in Ulrich Zwingli's treatise on providence which can be found in *On the Doctrine of Providence and Other Essays* (Durham, NC: Labyrinth Press, 1922).

⁹ Genevieve Lloyd, *Providence Lost* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 1.

redeployed or come under a certain kind of crisis in modernity. Lloyd, however, goes further than these other authors in examining the many treatments of providence from ancient Greece to early modern thought that do not associate meaning strictly with the intent of a transcendent will.

The diversity of her investigation—from the dramas of Euripides to Spinoza’s *Ethics*—focuses on the connections between providence and practices of self-cultivation that function to enact structures of meaning.¹⁰ Lloyd thus reinforces the importance of giving attention to the dimensions of the discourse on providence that exceed its mere propositional content, and shows particular interest in the way writing about providence appeals not just to the order of life, but to how the necessities of life are affectively engaged. Her interest, however, focuses on how writings concerned with providence can function in particular to shape ethical subjects better prepared to address the contours of material life. In this way, she can be contextualized as flagging the concerns of Weber and Nietzsche while drawing on some of the performative insights of Gauchet and Agamben. Lloyd writes:

Ideas of providence have strong emotional and imaginative force—whether in their evocation of a loving God or through the wonder elicited by ancient visions of a cosmos structured in accordance with necessary order. The intellectual content of providence has a rich history; but to fully understand it we must take into account its constant interplay with imagination and emotion.... Often, it is not a matter of adjudicating the adequacy of competing theories of providence. For providence changes according to the clusters it forms at different times with other concepts.... As those clusters shift and re-form, the emotional resonances of providence also change. Understanding the history of providence thus involves engaging with the emotions the idea evokes, and the writing strategies that philosophers have used to engage and educate those emotions. It involves taking seriously the literary dimensions of philosophical writing.¹¹

Lloyd’s approach thus acknowledges that the function of providence has to do with more than just claims about origins and divine plans to which meaning can be tethered. Instead, her reading of a range of texts on providence suggests that whatever meaning is secured by recourse to providence is always

¹⁰ In chapter one, I discussed two different senses of meaning, one conceptually connected to the category of intention (employed in Weber’s critique) and the other to the category of signification (more visible in Nietzsche’s discussion of meaning). In this chapter, I will argue that the classical discourse on providence has often presumed the latter rather than, or prior to the former.

¹¹ Lloyd, 4.

enacted in relation to embodied human subjects: subjects who are materially located in a certain place and time facing certain constraints; and subjects who relate to their world not only rationally, but also physically and emotionally. The variety of factors that render a certain claim about providence persuasive at one time are therefore inseparable from the import of the claim itself.

The particular thesis of *Providence Lost* is that the discourse around providence as a discourse designed to orient human life in relation to necessity was finally overshadowed in modern philosophical thought by the force of Descartes' doctrine of free will.¹² In Lloyd's view, because Descartes associated the will with a notion of infinitude both accessible to the mind but undetermined by sensibility or embodiment, he fundamentally undermined the notion of natural necessity in a way that has since proved troubling and disorienting. She thus returns to Spinoza's treatment of necessity in an attempt to recover an alternate and more tenable relation between human will and natural necessity. In Spinoza's corpus, she draws out the repetition of ancient Greek notions of providence that relate self-understanding not to a transcendent will, but to the whole of nature.¹³ Spinoza's understanding of providence is, in Lloyd's view, a modern "road not taken," but one that stands to be recovered. Offering a critique of modern rationalization reminiscent of Weber's, she writes,

We now live out our individual lives against the background of an implicit collective belief—however irrational it may be—that the borders between the controllable and the necessary are indefinitely shiftable.... [But bereavement often brings] the shock of recognition of the falseness of the general assumption that death can always in principle be averted.¹⁴

¹² Lloyd, 200, 210.

¹³ Lloyd, 207.

¹⁴ Lloyd, 307-308.

She argues, therefore, that a robust notion of natural necessity, through which an attenuated understanding of freedom can be cultivated, offers a more viable framework for finding meaning in life and in death.¹⁵

Writings about providence work to trace the outlines of this necessity and thus to reorient the habits, expectations, and desires of the human person. Lloyd largely frames this reorientation as something that happens primarily in the imagination. As she explains,

I have given the imaginative and emotional dimensions of ideas of providence a central place.... I have tried, wherever possible, to engage seriously with the play of imagination, and with the workings of emotion, in the philosophical writings addressed. To understand providence as it operates in specific texts is to enter into particular ways in which human minds have tried to accommodate themselves to their presence in the world—and to the thought of their absence from it. This engagement involves seeing more in the conceptual shifts with regard to providence than a succession of competing definitions of a unitary idea. Often, it is not a matter of adjudicating the adequacy of competing theories of providence. For providence changes according to the clusters it forms at different times with other concepts.¹⁶

Implicit in Lloyd's approach is an interest not only in the imagination, but in the way the body's activities and senses become attuned—with the aid of writing, argumentation, and repetition—to perceive and respond to circumstances with more clarity and emotional precision.

In this chapter I hope to make explicit this dimension of writing on providence. I will pay particular attention to how providence has been deployed to generate meaning *not* with reference to a transcendent locus—whether a divine intention or an otherworldly afterlife—but rather by bringing the boundedness of one's reality into sharper focus and reorienting the self with respect to the materialization of that reality. I want to show, in some ways extending Lloyd's argument, that reading and writing is not a merely imaginative or emotional exercise but also one that assumes and relies upon certain repeated and habituated practices through which one can relate differently both to one's immanent surroundings and to one's own self. In this way, I want to connect philosophical writing not

¹⁵ See Lloyd 11-12, 210-211, 307, 317-323.

¹⁶ Lloyd, 3-4.

only to affection, but to forms of embodied practice that exceed, form, and thus undergird both cognition and affection. Ultimately, attention to these dimensions of the historic discourse on providence will prove crucial to grasping similar dimensions at play in Calvin's arguments.

With these interests in tow, the purpose of the rest of this chapter will be to survey the shape of three distinct bodies of writing that have in some respect authorized the discourse on providence.

While it is necessary to look only briefly at each body of writing, my aim is to draw attention to the intersecting dimensions of philosophical argument, affective imagery, and repetitive embodied practices which are tied together in these writings by palpable material concerns over the order of life and the relation of life to suffering and death. I hope, in so doing, to persuade a reader that each of these writings are worthy of the extended attention that I am ultimately giving to these dimensions in Calvin's writing on providence.

I will begin, in this section, with intimations of the category of providence in ancient Greece, and finish by looking at parallel developments in Stoicism and in early medieval Christian thought. I will approach each writing by paying close attention to the following four characteristics of each text, in varying orders and to varying extents: 1) the context in which the discourse is elicited and practiced; 2) the spatio-temporal frameworks activated by the discourse on providence; 3) the relation of providential meaning to nature and immanent networks of cause and effect; and 4) the activation of discourse on providence in varying and specific genres, including argument, hymn, prayer, myth, and dialogue. I anticipate that this exploration will begin to clarify what it means to approach the discourse on providence in its character as both a theological doctrine and a form of practice involving cognitive, affective, and sensory habituation.¹⁷

¹⁷ In order to perform this reading, I have found certain theoretical resources to be especially useful. Among them are Catherine Bell's *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), in which Bell makes the following critique of approaches to ritual that rely on a dichotomy between writing and ritual or thought and bodily activity:

II. Earlier Greek Writings: Cleanthes and Plato

Unsurprisingly, there is no clear origin for the discourse on providence. We find the category functioning explicitly in Stoic literature by the turn of the common era.¹⁸ The purpose of this first section, however, is to look back at the tacit resonances of the doctrine before it was named as a

Theoretical descriptions of ritual generally regard it as action and thus automatically distinguish it from conceptual aspects of religion, such as beliefs, symbols, and myths. In some cases added qualifications may soften the distinction, but rarely do such descriptions question this immediate differentiation or the usefulness of distinguishing what is thought from what is done. Likewise, beliefs, creeds, symbols, and myths emerge as forms of mental content or conceptual blueprints: they direct, inspire, or promote activity, but they themselves are not activities. Ritual, like action, will act out, express, or perform these conceptual orientations. Sometimes the push for typological clarity will drive such differentiations to the extreme. Ritual is then described as particularly thoughtless action—routinized, habitual, obsessive, or mimetic—and therefore the purely formal, secondary, and mere physical expression of logically prior ideas (19).

Bell argues, instead, that thought and activity are related inasmuch as meaning becomes enacted through the differentiation of signs and the attendant material dispositions of dispositions and material contexts.

Ritual participants act, whereas those observing them think. In ritual activity, conceptions and dispositions are fused for the participants, which yields meaning. Meaning for the outside theorist comes differently: insofar as he or she can perceive in ritual the true basis of its meaningfulness for the ritual actors—that is, its fusion of conceptual and dispositional categories—then the theorist can go beyond mere thoughts about activity to grasp the meaningfulness of the ritual (19, 28).

Amy Hollywood's "Performativity, Citationality, Ritualization" in *Bodily Citations*, ed. Ellen T. Armour and Susan M. St. Ville (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), through a reading of Derrida, has connected Bell's insight explicitly to the meaning of texts in such a way that texts and bodily rituals can be approached and interpreted together as practices that differentiate signs through which matter is performed:

For both Bell and Derrida ritual is like language not because it is a text whose symbolic meanings must be uncovered or deciphered but because rituals are actions that generate meanings in the specific context of other sets of meaningful actions and discourses. Meaning is generated through the iteration and differentiation of signs. Signs refer to other signs within the signifying chain rather than to external realities. Although linguistic signs can and do refer to extralinguistic realities as well as to other signs, in the realm of signifying actions, the distinction between signifying chain and external reality is more difficult to maintain. In other words, ritual actions are—not surprisingly—more like performative speech than they are like [descriptive speech]. Meanings are constitutive and generate that to which they refer.... The meaning *is* the constituted reality, thereby rendering ritual actions more like illocutions (in which the doing or saying, in the right conditions, is the performance) (260, 268).

This suggests that writing and reading both can be fruitfully understood as forms of practice that signify and thus "materialize" the world and the self through the negotiation of repetition and difference. This is relevant to my argument throughout this chapter inasmuch as I will argue that these writings about providence do precisely this kind of work—they reform the reader's ability to see and engage the world by performing a different disposition in both reader and world.

¹⁸ As we will see in the next part of this section, Seneca pens a treatise on providence in the first century of the common era. Epictetus' (55-135 CE) *Discourses* also contain several explicit discussions in providence.

doctrine—before it began to be systematically understood under the name “providence” (or Greek *pronoia*—lit. foresight). One place to look is very early in the formation of the Stoic traditions. There, we meet Cleanthes (331-232 BCE), who was the first successor to Zeno, founder of the earliest Stoic school. Cleanthes famously praised the ordering principle of the cosmos in his “Hymn to Zeus.”¹⁹ In this lyrical piece, Zeus is addressed as “the Chief of nature (*physeos archege*), who steers with Your Law all things;” he is approached as the One whose *logos* (voice, word, reason) human beings must seek to *mimema* (represent, follow, imitate).²⁰ Cleanthes names Zeus the giver of being; the one whose image human beings strive to attain; the universe’s guide; and the origin of its ordering Reason. As the hymn progresses, Zeus is praised not only for his position but also for his activity: he “directs the common *Logos*,” sets straight what is crooked, puts in order what is disorderly, fits good and bad things together, makes things unlovely seem lovely.²¹

The hymn ends, finally, with a prayer of supplication—a prayer for aid in the activity of mimesis:

But Zeus, all giver, shrouded in the dark clouds, ruler of the thunderbolt
 You must save men from baneful inexperience
 which you, Father, must scatter from the soul (*psyche*); And give that we become to participate
 in insight (*gnomes*), by trusting in which You steer all things in justice,
 in order that we, being honored, repay You with honor,
 singing (*hymnountes*) of Your works, constantly, as befits one, being
 a mortal, to do, since there is no greater gift to offer both for mortals and gods
 than, in justice, of the universal law (*koinon nomon*) always (*aei*) to sing (*hymnein*).²²

This singer of the hymn therefore desires the capacity to *better* perform the eternal hymning of the wise power of Zeus. One begins to see a kind of performative repetition in the words and the aim of the hymn itself: this hymn is constructed to enact its own prayer. It acknowledges the distance between the

¹⁹ Cleanthes, “Hymn to Zeus,” in P.A. Meijer, *Stoic Theology* (Delft: Eburon, 2008), 209-ff.

²⁰ Cleanthes, 210.

²¹ Cleanthes, 213-218.

²² Cleanthes, 223.

human addresser and the divine addressee, but in the very utterance it attempts to close that distance by inverting the relationship between the addresser and addressee. Zeus is named as the origin of the nature that encompasses human life, the one whose image stamps the human image, and the one whose *logoi* human beings strive to mimic, echo, or represent. The distance plaguing the singer of the hymn is therefore a distance of insight rather than of being; it is a distance of *gnome*: a form of knowledge associated with will, opinion, and even with rhetoric or aphorism. The one writing or singing the hymn to Zeus therefore desires to will as Zeus wills, to conform that will and its corresponding action to the action of Zeus, and finally to receive honor as Zeus receives honor. In this way, the hymn hopes that the words (*logoi*) which shape and guide the cosmos will also come to shape the soul (*psyche*) of the human subject into one that befits the ordering of the cosmos.

One can begin to discern, from the opening invocation of Zeus, the enactment of a ritual structure. In naming Zeus, the speaker activates a structure by which the deity's being and activity will come to refashion the structure of the speaker's life. Zeus is honored as both origin and active guide. By saying, praying, and singing the works of Zeus, the singer performs the work of attaining participation in the space and time of Zeus's divinity in relation to the world. The language that will later come to define providence—language of ordering, fitting, steering, guiding the cosmos—permeates the poem. This language serves to enact a venue in which the speaker is able to say Zeus's *logoi* with Zeus, and thus to begin to imitate (*mimema*) and ultimately to participate with Zeus in ordering nature. The closing lines seal this activity as the proper activity of mortals. By singing, by *hymning* the origin and guide, this writing invites mortals to attain what is 'fitting' for their mortality—to attain a part in the perpetuity (*aei*) of the divine and universal law enacted by Zeus's care for the world.

Even prior to Cleanthes' hymn, hints of the discourse on providence are visible in several of Plato's dialogues (*approx.* 424-348 BCE). The clearest example of these early echoes may be observed in the *Timaeus*, to which Lloyd gives some attention in *Providence Lost*. The dialogue begins after Socrates

has discussed the ideal state and its ideal citizens. It then proceeds to layer the dialogue on the ideal state with the founding of Athens itself, finally embedding this story in the story of the founding and nature of the universe. Throughout, one can discern intimations of the discourse on providence.

According to Lloyd,

Necessity, chance, and design are interwoven in an intricate dance throughout the *Timaeus* narrative.... The notion of providence—of the adapting of things to their natures—allows Plato to move between what might otherwise be disparate accounts of the world and of human behavior within that world. Providence is a central concept in the content of the story. It is also methodologically crucial, determining what will and will not be included. It guides the construction of the narrative. As the story proceeds through the generation of the human body and its members, and of the human soul, Timaeus reminds his listeners that the whole narration is a story of how things must have come to be—“for what reason and by what providence of the gods; and holding fast to probability, we must pursue our way” (*Timaeus* 44d). Providence is here the other side of the coin to Timaeus’s version of “probability.” It is what allows the story to carry its own force of necessity: this is how things must have been; this is how “we must pursue our way” (*Timaeus* 48d).²³

Here, providence is discernable not as an accepted claim, but as an argument that arises to offer a persuasive model of order and shape undergirding the present circumstances of life. The necessity spoken of here is not a mathematical form of necessity as much as a strong sense of what Lloyd calls “fittingness”—a heightening of one’s sense of persuasion that, given present experience, things *had to have been* arranged in a certain way. Furthermore, as Lloyd’s last quotation from the *Timaeus* suggests, the dialogue again and again connects the question of origins to the matter of ethics. Socrates’ opening association between the form of the ideal state and the character of its ideal citizen is repeated as the continuing layers of dialogue on the origins of Athens and the universe continue to relate to the nature of ethical life. While Lloyd does not explicitly name the function of providence in this dialogue as a ritualized activity of moral formation, her language in summary acutely captures the heart of this assertion. She writes,

²³ Lloyd, 62, 63-64.

Timaeus's conclusions can indeed seem arbitrary and bizarre. Yet his reasoning is designed to appeal to intellect, imagination, and emotion all at once. It relies on a sense of fittingness... which cannot be readily separated out into a level of pure logic and the attendant layers of imagination of emotion that embellish it. It appeals to the soul as a dynamic unity. What we have here is no mere dressing up of something that could—without loss of persuasiveness—be presented as bare logical argument.²⁴

This observation offers us the crucial insight that, even in early traces of the discourse on providence, claims about providence were inseparable from the human questions that occasion the discourse itself. The structure activated by the speaking or writing on providence—a structure of origin, causation, order—function to situate the self such that moral life and meaning become inseparable from and formed by the telling itself.

There is another place in Plato's corpus where providence plays a role. This time, however, the resonances emerge—with a slightly different tenor—precisely out of the theme of death and dying. The setting is Socrates' own death, as told in the *Phaedo*. Throughout the dialogue, we read and remember the preparation for this death: an intimate gathering of companions around a beloved guide, a time moving knowingly toward the final inevitability of his passing.

The *Phaedo*, like the *Timaeus*, references the founding of Athens—but this time through the invocation of a layer of mythical time. The time of Socrates' death, we are told, will coincide with the return of the ritual reenactment of the city's founding by Theseus. His execution had been delayed due to the departure of a ship to Delos which, upon its return, will inaugurate a celebration in commemoration of Theseus' ancient return. During the interim of the ships' departure and arrival, tradition holds that no executions will take place.²⁵ The body of the dialogue, recounting Socrates' last evening, thus begins when the ship returns—signifying both the origin of Athens and the impending

²⁴ Lloyd, 65.

²⁵ Plato, *Phaedo*, 58b.

performance of Socrates' execution.²⁶

It is interesting to note the extent to which the activity of the dialogue resonates with certain respects of the final scenes of *Melancholia*. The companions of Socrates gather around him, knowing it will be the last such gathering. The time of the dialogue is heightened and distended by the constant vigilance around this end so near. The activity itself recalls, or perhaps prefigures, the terms made familiar by Cleanthes' "Hymn to Zeus:" music, *logoi*, perpetuity. Here, however, we see that music is not elicited by a prayer, but rather already as a response to a sacred duty;²⁷ its function is to charm and keep at bay the fear of death.²⁸ We see, furthermore, that *logoi* are not merely mimicked by human beings as in Cleanthes' hymn. *Logoi*, here, are actively whittled and assembled. This practice of argumentation, of assembling *logoi*, enacts both the preparation for death²⁹ and the structure of eternity.³⁰ Indeed, the final gathering is quite literally structured by the act of building—picking up, putting down, undoing, and reshaping one argument after another.

But as Socrates' death becomes imminent, we see another form of structuring activity emerging: the activity of *mythos*, or storytelling. As the sun begins to set and the time of the end draws near, Socrates' last argument draws to a close. He has made one final case, using the tools of philosophy, for the immortality of the soul. Even as he leaves off, however, he suggests that the task of crafting the *logoi* will outlast his mortal body. The dialogue recounts this as follows:

Socrates: Then when death attacks a person, the mortal part, it seems, dies; whereas the immortal part gets out of the way of death, departs, and goes away intact and undestroyed.

Cebes: It appears so.

Socrates: Beyond all doubt then, Cebes, soul is immortal and imperishable, and our souls really

²⁶ *Phaedo*, 59e.

²⁷ *Phaedo*, 60e-61b.

²⁸ *Phaedo*, 77e.

²⁹ *Phaedo*, 64a.

³⁰ *Phaedo*, 89b-d.

will exist in Hades.

Cebes: Well, Socrates, for my part I've no further objection, nor can I doubt the arguments (*logoi*) at any point. But if Simmias here or anyone else has anything to say, he'd better not keep silent; as I know of no future occasion to which anyone wanting to speak or hear about such things could put it off.

Simmias: Well no, nor have I any further ground for doubt myself, as far as the arguments (*logoi*) go; though in view of the size of the subject under discussion, and having a low regard for human weakness, I'm bound to retain some doubt in my mind about what's been said.

Socrates: Not only that, Simmias, what you say is right, so the initial hypothesis, even if they're acceptable to you, should still be examined more clearly: if you can analyze them adequately, you will, I believe, follow the argument to the furthest point to which a human being can follow it up; and if you get that clear, you'll seek nothing further.³¹

Socrates, acknowledging the need for continued argumentation, nonetheless shifts gears in the final minutes of his time. He puts down the argument and picks up a different kind of discourse: a myth of the nature of the universe. By embedding his arguments for immortality in this larger myth, Socrates functionally embeds the individual's immortal soul in a larger framework or structure that supports it, orders it, or, in Socrates' words, "cares" (*epimeleias*) for it. "But it's fair to keep in mind, friends," he instructs, "if a soul is immortal, then it needs care, not only for the sake of this time in which what we call 'life' lasts, but for the whole of time."³² In a manner different from but resonant with the storytelling of the *Timaeus*, Socrates' myth constructs a picture of the geography of the soul's dwelling in the afterlife so that, according to Socrates, the wise and "well-ordered" soul will not be unfamiliar with what befalls it.³³ This geographical imagery repeats the function of embedding at yet another layer: it situates the earth itself in a cosmos more grand. After finally describing the form of judgment under which the soul is called to account,³⁴ Socrates concludes as follows:

Now to insist that those things are just as I've related them would not be fitting for a man of intelligence; but that either that or something like it is true about our souls and their dwellings,

³¹ *Phaedo*, 106e-107b.

³² *Phaedo*, 107c.

³³ *Phaedo*, 108a.

³⁴ *Phaedo*, 113d-114c.

given that the soul evidently is immortal, that, I think, is fitting and worth risking, for one who believes that it is so—for a noble risk it is—so one should repeat such things to oneself like a spell; which is just why I’ve so prolonged the tale (*mythos*).³⁵

In the language of “order” and that which is “fitting” as proper aims for myth-making, we see the germs and seeds of the discourse on providence. The structure of providence is animated in the very act of telling myths that act to construct and figure the wider framework in which the soul finds itself.

Moreover, as in the *Timaeus*, we see a refusal to ultimately separate the practice of making *logoi* and the practice of making *mythos*. Philosophical argumentation and storytelling are bound together, layered to form and guide not only minds but their relations to emotions and bodies. Socrates’ final myth encases and protects the soul that has been invigorated by arguments. Together, these function to alleviate fear and guide emotions so that the soul becomes as well-ordered as the cosmos around it to best receive that which is inevitable.³⁶

Finally, the ritual context of this dialogue is explicit. Not only does it unfold in a time layered over the ritual repetition of the founding of Athens—a feature of writing that itself prefigures the layering of the founding of Athens, the ideal state, and the cosmos found later in the *Timaeus*. The dialogue also performs a series of ritual repetitions in the midst of a community gathering. We have seen the way in which the arguments themselves are exchanged and repeated with the suggestion that this be an ongoing practice.³⁷ We may also note the avowed nature of Socrates’ myth: “Repeat such things,” he exhorts his companions, “like a spell”—for the care of one’s soul requires that one learn to dwell in a structure befitting that soul.³⁸ And we must not forget the ritual bathing Socrates requests in order to save the women the trouble of cleaning the body; nor should we forget Socrates’ cheerful

³⁵ *Phaedo*, 114d.

³⁶ The inevitability of Socrates’ death factors in at several occasions: see *Phaedo*, 116d, 117a.

³⁷ See *Phaedo*, 106e-107b, quoted above.

³⁸ Again, *Phaedo*, 114d, quoted above.

reference to his cup of poison as libation amidst the tears of his friends. These are reminders, all too poignant, of the deep sense of human grief over the death of a beloved one that is both honored and managed within this dialogue.³⁹

We will now proceed to see ways in which the later Stoics and medieval Christians pick up strands from these early instances of the discourse on providence—repeating, innovating, and refiguring. In certain ways, these later authors render the doctrine more coherent, and certainly more systematic. Rarely, however, is the mortal ache that elicits the discourse as visceral as in these earliest writings.

III. Later Latin Writings: Stoicism and the Transition to Christianity

Though staggered in time, it could be argued that Stoic and medieval Christian writings on providence constitute parallel approaches descending from the earliest texts just surveyed. This section in no way intends to offer an exhaustive account of the countless varied and interesting ways that providence is taken up by these later traditions. The constraints of space permit me to only touch upon several of the most important features of the most distinct trajectories of each. Specifically, I will pinpoint two trends in tension with one another that set the stage for Calvin's later appropriation of the doctrine: first, the close proximity of the divine to immanent necessity in later Stoic writings, and second, the increasing distance between God's being and God's providence over nature in Christian writings. Throughout this discussion, we will see repetitions of the features highlighted in the previous section, including the association with ritual practice, the use of the discourse for a kind of ethical formation or preparation, the association of the discourse with genres of writing that include but are irreducible to philosophical argument, and the emergence of the discourse out of concerns over mortality and suffering.

³⁹ See *Phaedo*, 115a and 117b.

a. Seneca and Marcus Aurelius

In the first century of the common era, Seneca wrote a treatise on providence—*De Providentia*—in response to a petition from his friend Lucilius, the Roman governor of Sicily. Such a title serves to authorize the discourse on providence in a way it had not been authorized in the earlier texts we have surveyed. Through the topics addressed, this text also indicates the kinds of challenges that would classically come to shape the discourse. One of these challenges is, of course, the ancient question of mortality refigured as the “problem of evil.” The text opens as follows: “You have inquired of me, Lucilius, why, if the world be ruled by a providence, so many evils befall good men?”⁴⁰ Seneca proceeds to echo a theme seen earlier in Cleanthes, namely that to pursue the doctrine of providence is to pursue participation in structuring divine *logoi*. “I will do what is not difficult,” Seneca writes. “I will plead the cause of the gods.”⁴¹ He expands on this as follows:

I will reconcile you to the gods, who are kindly disposed to the best men. For nature never suffers the good to injure the good. Between good men and the gods exists a friendship—virtue being the bond; friendship do I say? nay rather a relationship and a similarity, since, indeed, a good man differs from a god only in time, being his pupil, follower, and true child, whom that glorious parent—no light exactor of virtues—trains more severely than others, after the manner of strict fathers.⁴²

This reiteration of the relationship of imitation between humans and the divine sets the stage for Seneca’s answer to the question of evil: “Let the same thing be clear to you concerning God; He does not spoil a good man by too much tenderness; He proves him, hardens him, and prepares him for Himself.”⁴³ Good, therefore, is immediately dissociated from pleasure. It is linked instead to the ordering function that divinity performs in its relation to nature—the function of reason in relation to

⁴⁰ Seneca, *De Providentia*, 1. This and all citations of *De Providentia* point to the chapter notation rather than to page numbers.

⁴¹ Seneca, 1.

⁴² Seneca, 1.

⁴³ Seneca, 1.

necessity that will constitute the aforementioned relation of similarity between the human “child” and the divine “parent.”⁴⁴

In Seneca’s opening words on the character of providence, it is apparent that he does not understand providence as a rule or decision made by a mind apart from nature and subsequently imposed on nature. Providence, on the contrary, signifies an ordering aspect *within* nature. According to Seneca, admitting the existence of providence means admitting “that it is not without some guiding hand that so great a work [as nature] continues to exist, that this assemblage and running to and fro of the stars are not effected by an accidental impulse... and [that] so great a mass of brilliant lights which shine according to the will of their disposer, goes on by the command of an eternal law.”⁴⁵ Providence, then, is simply a technical term for a certain posture toward perceiving nature according to its law. Lucilius’ complaint is not that providence does not exist, but that Lucilius finds himself in discord with the workings of providence. It is the aim of Seneca’s writing, therefore, to articulate the larger structure of providential ordering active in nature. In so doing, Seneca hopes to cultivate Lucilius for participation in this form of divine perception. Lucilius’ therapy therefore amounts to a form of submission to subjective reformation. “But now,” Seneca begins chapter three, “I will show that what appear to be evils are not so.”⁴⁶

He proceeds to work through a series of analogies—medical, surgical, martial, natural—to shape a relation to a notion of good distinctly dissociated from pleasure, where suffering and even death occur

⁴⁴ Seneca explicitly associates the ordering principle not just with the divine parent, but the divine *father*—no doubt drawing an analogy to the order of the Roman family, although the relation of this imagery would be interesting to track into later texts on providence. He writes: “Do you not see how fathers show their love in one way, and mothers in another? The father orders his children to be aroused from sleep in order that they may start early upon their pursuits—even on holidays he does not permit them to be idle, and he draws from them sweat and sometimes tears. But the mother fondles them in her lap, wishes to keep them out of the sun, wishes them never to be unhappy, never to cry, never to toil. Toward good men God has the mind of a father, he cherishes for them a manly love, and he says, ‘Let them be harassed by toil, by suffering, by losses, in order that they may gather true strength’” (Seneca, 2).

⁴⁵ Seneca, 1.

⁴⁶ Seneca, 3.

as part of the improvement of natural being.⁴⁷ Seneca's aim is not to argue for a mere self-sacrifice to some 'greater good,' however. On the contrary, Seneca's argument seeks to enact an 'I' that can be realized at one with the divine 'I.' He cites a speech of Demetrius: "*I suffer no constraint, I endure nothing against my will, nor am I a slave to God, but I am in harmony with Him; and so much the more because I know that all things move because I know that all things move on forever according to a certain and fixed law.*"⁴⁸ Just as the human body is part and parcel with nature, the human mind participates in the divine ordering principle of nature. Submission of the body to natural necessity therefore functions to fine-tune the mind to the workings of the law at the heart of nature's providential operation. Why should one fear the body's natural decay, Seneca asks, when the mind can achieve participation in the eternal through that very submission? Understanding this very truth—that one's time of suffering and dying is inevitably approaching in nature's flux—is a means of aligning one's own self to that of divinity.

Seneca insists furthermore that it is precisely in relation to the perception of nature's necessities that such participation can be achieved. He argues: "Those, therefore, whom God proves and loves, He hardens, examines, and exercises: but those whom He seems to indulge and spare, He is keeping because of their weakness for evils yet to come. You are mistaken if you think anyone is exempt."⁴⁹ The one who can gird up the strength to face suffering and affirm necessity, however, will rise like the sun over the earth: "I do not say that he does not feel them, but he overcomes them and even quietly and calmly rises superior to their assaults."⁵⁰ Such a result is possible and furthermore laudable because, in this recognition, one becomes properly aligned to a reality in which the divine principle, the eternal law,

⁴⁷ Seneca, 3-4.

⁴⁸ Seneca, 5.

⁴⁹ Seneca, 4.

⁵⁰ Seneca, 2.

is immanent to the operation of nature itself. “Whatever it is which commanded us thus to live, and thus to die,” Seneca continues, “binds the gods also by the same necessity: an unchangeable course carries along human and divine affairs alike.”⁵¹

We can thus see the contours of one path through which themes active in Cleanthes’ hymn and Socrates’ death have developed. In *De Providentia*, Seneca affirms the association of the divine with the principle of ordering and guiding; he furthermore engages in the activity of writing in order to close that familiar gap between human understanding and divine law. While Cleanthes sought to narrow the gap between the divine and the human through hymn and prayer, however, Seneca prefers the medicine of reason. Rather than approaching the divine *logos* from a posture of devotion, Seneca employs *logoi* in order to “fit,” as it were, Lucilius’ mind to the working of divine mind in nature.

We might ponder, however, what has become of the role of *mythos*, or of enacting the structure of providence by ritualized storytelling. If providence is immanent to nature, are we to understand that providence is enacted merely by attention to the *logos*, or ordered logic of natural causation? On the contrary, Seneca admits the possibility of representing natural events as events of chance and of fate. In this sense, then, we can see that it is precisely the discourse on providence as a certain *kind* of argument that simultaneously serves a mythical function. It both constructs a representation of nature *as* ordered and functions to enact that order through the effects of the discourse. The ‘story’ of providence, as an ordered structure or world of meaning fitted to human experience, is therefore woven into the forms of argumentation that present such purposes persuasively to the mind.

This more subtle function of language—ordering nature through its narrative telling *of* a certain representation of nature itself—is vividly discernible in another classic Stoic text: the *Meditations* written by Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius (121-180, CE). He composed the twelve books of the *Meditations* as a personal writing practice over the course of a decade in which he was embroiled in

⁵¹ Seneca, 5.

several military campaigns—a context ripe to elicit reflections on duty, tradition, courage, suffering, and mortality.

In his second meditation, Marcus Aurelius writes as follows: “All that is from the gods is full of Providence. That which is from fortune is not separated from nature or without an interweaving and involution with the things which are ordered by Providence. From thence all things flow; and there is besides necessity, and that which is for the advantage of the whole universe, of which thou art a part.”⁵² Here, as with Seneca, we see providence distinguished but not separated from the material of fortune and necessity. All three—providence, fortune, and necessity—are simultaneously ways of perceiving nature. Their distinctions are not metaphysical, but relational. They are characterizations of nature which are differentiated according to a person’s cultivated relation *to* nature. In a sense, one could say that for Marcus Aurelius, providence, fortune and necessity are layers of the same reality. They are different ways of perceiving, relating to, and participating in the whole of nature. This becomes clearer in a further quotation, which helpfully brings to bear the concerns that elicit one’s particular relation to providence. To himself, Marcus Aurelius writes,

Since it is possible that you may depart from life this very moment, regulate every act and thought accordingly. But to go away from among men, if there are gods, is not a thing to be afraid of, for the gods will not involve thee in evil; but if indeed they do not exist, or if they have no concern about human affairs, what is it to me to live in a universe devoid of gods or devoid of Providence? But in truth they do exist, and they do care for human things, and they have put all the means in man's power to enable him not to fall into real evils. This, however, is not only an operation of nature, but it is also a thing which conduces to the purposes of nature. To observe too how man comes near to the deity, and by what part of him, and when this part of man is so disposed.⁵³

Reminiscent of Socrates’ own encounter with approaching death, Marcus Aurelius acknowledges the status of the discourse on providence. Arguments and stories about providence are not to be treated as

⁵² Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2. As with Seneca, citations refer to book denominations rather than page numbers.

⁵³ Marcus Aurelius, 2.

matters of brute fact or as insights fixed once and for all. The myth does not appeal to a sharpened intellect in that sense, but it is something that must continue—along with its accompanying arguments—to be told. In Marcus Aurelius’ case, this telling drove ten years of habitual writing: a repetitive practice once again signaling forms of ritualization associated with the discourse on providence. And perhaps in this writing practice, we are to understand a repeated effort at *telling the truth*—constantly repositioning the sticks in the structure that makes life habitable by keeping fear at bay, enabling one to say daily, with Marcus Aurelius, “But in truth they do exist, and they do care for human beings.” This providence is not separate from nature, but gives a name to nature seen *as* purposive, or with a mind and body formed to participate in nature in a way most fitting to the living of life, dealing with suffering, and facing one’s own death.

In our several examples from Latin Stoic writings, it is possible to see a new but not unfamiliar organization of the discourse on providence. It is new insofar as providence has explicitly drawn near to, and is indeed wholly immanent to, nature itself. The discourse, however, frames and is framed by a familiar set of concerns: the thoroughly embodied concerns of suffering and death. It also participates in practices of self-formation that utilize, in different and complex ways, the recognizable tools of argument and narrative figuring to repeatedly enact structures for perceiving, knowing, and participating in life. Let us now turn finally to one important early Christian iteration in order to observe how a set of subtly contrasting of alignments contributes to the character of the ongoing discourse.

b. Boethius

I close the argument of this chapter with a brief look at one of the more influential writings in the relatively early development of Christian theology, a text devoted to the matter of providence:

Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy*.⁵⁴ Boethius lived approximately from 480-525 CE. He was born of

⁵⁴ Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. W. V. Cooper (Midlothian, TX: Alacrity Press, 2013).

Roman nobility, and served as a senator and even briefly as a regional consul before serving as *magister officiorum* over the Roman government. This text, however, was occasioned by the reversal of his fortune. Accused of participation in a conspiracy, Boethius spent the final days of a shortened life under house arrest. During this time, he penned the *Consolation of Philosophy*. With this text, then, we return to the particular setting of impending execution in yet another expression of vigilance before death.

The text begins with the authorial character in a state of melancholy—ill-prepared for, yet longing in despair for the release from suffering occasioned by death. We read:

Happy is that death which thrusts not itself upon men in their pleasant years, yet comes to them at the oft-repeated cry of their sorrow. Sad is it how death turns away from the unhappy with so deaf an ear, and will not close, cruel, the eyes that weep. Ill is it to trust to Fortune's fickle bounty, and while yet she smiled upon me, the hour of gloom had well-nigh overwhelmed my head. Now has the cloud put off its alluring face, wherefore without scruple my life drags out its wearying delays.⁵⁵

Suddenly, into his chamber and its misery, enters the figure of a woman. She appears over his down-turned head, startling him with a majestic face and fiery eyes. Boethius emphasizes first the spatial character of her appearance, recalling that “one could but doubt her varying stature, for at one moment she repressed it to the common measure of a man, at another she seemed to touch with her crown the very heavens: and when she had raised higher her head, it pierced even the sky and baffled the sight of those who would look upon it.”⁵⁶ Her insight and complexion meet the intellect and temporal condition of human beings from above; she brings with her the air of an age or realm other than the one in which Boethius suffers.

But a most telling quality of her appearance, prefiguring the quality of the discourse she will bring to Boethius, is to be found in the description of her costume. “Her clothing,” we are told, “was wrought of the finest thread by subtle workmanship brought to an indivisible piece. This had she woven

⁵⁵ Boethius, 1.

⁵⁶ Boethius, 1.

with her own hands, as I afterwards did learn by her own showing.”⁵⁷ She is a character whose work is weaving herself an indivisible cover—a practice, we are told, she will teach to Boethius. The description of the cloth proceeds to further define this practice: “On the border below was woven the symbol II, on that above was to be read a ⊕. And between the two letters there could be marked degrees, by which, as by the rungs of a ladder, ascent might be made from the lower principle to the higher.”⁵⁸ The signs on her garment not only recall the spatial situation of the encounter—the woman approaching Boethius from above; they also serve to foreshadow the rearrangement that will be brought about by her teaching. When she approaches Boethius, she describes him as follows: “‘Now he lies there; extinct his reason's light, his neck in heavy chains thrust down, his countenance with grievous weight downcast; ah! the brute earth is all he can behold.’”⁵⁹ Boethius’ head is bent to the ground, his mind craving extinction in the earth toward which his body cowers. She declares however, that her acts of weaving—her whittling of arguments in a certain constructive succession—will treat him according to a “physician’s art.”⁶⁰ Boethius recalls,

When she saw that I was not only silent, but utter]y tongue-tied and dumb, she put her hand gently upon my breast, and said, ‘There is no danger: he is suffering from drowsiness, that disease which attacks so many minds which have been deceived. He has forgotten himself for a moment and will quickly remember, as soon as he recognizes me. That he may do so, let me brush away from his eyes the darkening cloud of thoughts of matters perishable.’ So saying, she gathered her robe into a fold and dried my swimming eyes.”⁶¹

In these initial pages, we can note three functions associated with the woman’s robe. First, before Boethius knows who she is, her robe functions to comfort him and to signal another way—another unforeseen or forgotten space from which his despair may find a cure. The woman will soon invite

⁵⁷ Boethius, 1.

⁵⁸ Boethius, 1.

⁵⁹ Boethius, 3.

⁶⁰ Boethius, 3.

⁶¹ Boethius, 3.

Boethius into the act of weaving, first through practical argument—signaled by the *pi* embroidered onto the front—and then through theory, signaled by the *theta* oriented above it. These Greek letters denote the Practical and Theoretical—the two hierarchically ordered divisions of what Boethius will soon recall as this woman’s name: Philosophy.⁶²

So she begins her treatment with the comfort of companionship: “Surely,” she says to Boethius, “Philosophy never allowed herself to let the innocent go upon their journey un-befriended.”⁶³ She sets out the promise of a structure of protection, telling Boethius that “our leader, Reason, gathers her forces into her citadel, while the enemy are busied in plundering useless baggage.”⁶⁴ Philosophy observes that Boethius has been driven far from the safety of this very citadel by being overcome with passions, leading to his misdirected rage. This diagnosis inaugurates the second level of work: the reordering of Boethius’ perceptions to the true nature of the world and its occurrences. Philosophy applies her treatment through a series of dialogical arguments aimed at helping him to practically distinguish the character of Fortune from the character of Providence in the arc of his own life’s experiences. Near the close of Book II, Boethius remarks,

‘Those arguments have a fair form and are clothed with all the sweetness of speech and of song. When a man listens to them, they delight him; but only so long. The wretched have a deeper feeling of their misfortunes. Wherefore when these pleasing sounds fall no longer upon the ear, this deep-rooted misery again weighs down the spirit.’

‘It is so,’ [Philosophy] said. ‘For these are not the remedies for your sickness, but in some sort are the applications for your grief which chafes against its cure. When the time comes, I will apply those which are to penetrate deeply.’⁶⁵

⁶² Boethius, 3.

⁶³ Boethius, 3.

⁶⁴ Boethius, 4.

⁶⁵ Boethius, 16.

The third round of treatment—these deeper arguments—appear in the final books of the *Consolation of Philosophy*. We see Philosophy transition from arguments geared at reforming Boethius’ perception to arguments that refigure Boethius’ overall situation—arguments now aimed to care for his newly-ordered soul by embedding him in a different kind of world from the one in which he met despair. This last round of argumentation performs its goal by addressing first the nature of the work of providence, and then the nature of providence itself.

On the work of providence, Philosophy offers arguments that resemble those of Seneca and Marcus Aurelius. Her arguments distinguish providence’s work from other arrangements of nature, but as an ordered arrangement layered atop notions of chance or fate. According to Philosophy,

Wherefore high Providence has thus often shown her strange wonder, namely, that bad men should make other bad men good... To divine power, and to that alone, are evil things good, when it uses them suitably so as to draw good results therefrom. For a definite order embraces all things, so that even when some subject leaves the true place assigned to it in the order, it returns to an order, though another, it may be, lest aught in the realm of Providence be left to random chance.⁶⁶

Providential dispensation therefore obtains in the natural order, but from an origin and to an end that extend beyond the realm of definite human perception. Philosophy thus defines ‘chance’ precisely as the limited human perception of nature: “We may therefore define chance as an unexpected result from the coincidence of certain causes in matters where there was another purpose.” Order, however, “emanates from its source, which is Providence, and disposes all things in their proper time and place.”⁶⁷ This argument, so far, seems in kind with its Stoic predecessor. In the arguments outlined in the previous section, recall that providence is the immanent function of a divine and natural law that encases individual human life and perception and in which the human mind can learn to participate.

A different formation begins to emerge, however, in the final argument of the *Consolation*. The

⁶⁶ Boethius, 66.

⁶⁷ Boethius, 71.

common objection that divine ordering is a threat to human freedom moves Philosophy from her argument about the work of providence to the nature of providence itself, or to an argument about the nature of the God who is the source of providence. Providence, she argues, does not threaten human freedom because freedom is part and parcel of a reasoning nature. Reason requires the freedom to judge based upon the knowledge that comes from perception. This judgment, however, is not equal in human and heavenly beings.⁶⁸ In fact, she goes on to argue that God's position vis-à-vis the world allows God a fundamentally different kind of knowledge of the world—a knowledge that does not compete with the human freedom attached to attenuated knowledge of the world, but embraces the temporality of the world as a whole.⁶⁹

This arrangement differs from that of the Stoic desire for participation in the divine *logos* in two crucial respects. First, the relation of the divine to the world is refigured as fundamentally one of knowledge and perception. This does not preclude, but does *precede* the specifically providential function of ordering and guidance. Providence, in other words, is here founded on the relative distance⁷⁰ of the knower/known relation rather than on the sheer intimacy of the mind/body relation active entirely within the sphere of nature.

According to Philosophy, "Since then all that is known is apprehended, as we just now showed, not according to its nature but according to the nature of the knower, let us examine, so far as we lawfully may, the character of the divine nature, so that we may be able to learn what its knowledge is." She goes on to explain that this divine knower is qualitatively different from a human knower because God resides in eternity, rather than within time: "What we should rightly call eternal is that which grasps

⁶⁸ Boethius, 71.

⁶⁹ See Boethius, 71-73.

⁷⁰ I want to make clear that my reading of Boethius does not intend to overplay this distance. There is still a deep intimacy in the relation of the eternal and the temporal. Boethius should not be construed as figuring God "wholly other." There is, however, a qualitative distance added when God relates to the world as a knower *of* the world.

and possesses wholly and simultaneously the fullness of unending life.... For to pass through unending life... is one thing; but it is another thing to grasp simultaneously the whole of unending life in the present; this is plainly a peculiar property of the mind of God.”⁷¹ Her argument ultimately resists the notion that the divine relation to nature named by providence is a relation immanent to nature itself. Rather, nature is conceived as “unending life,” but God’s relation to nature is one that resides in a space that is not identical to that life. God’s space is rather capable of containing it as a whole. In Philosophy’s words, God stands in such a relation to the world that God is able to “grasp” it “simultaneously.”⁷² The universe, she says, is merely continual. God is eternal.⁷³

This qualitative difference between God and nature sets up a second structural distinction from Stoic arrangements of providence; namely, that rational human beings take on an analogical and not merely participatory relation to the divine. Philosophy explains, “If therefore we, who have our share in possession of reason, could go further and possess the judgment of the mind of God, we should then think it most just that human reason should yield itself to the mind of God, just as we have determined that the senses and imagination ought to yield to reason.”⁷⁴ This analogy affirms the similarity of humans to the divine in terms of the human ability to ascend to the realm of reasoned perception of the world. It is by virtue of this very reason, however, that humans ultimately recognize the fittingness of the order of the world as one beyond the clarity of human understanding—as one secured instead by the fittingness of the human to God. God, figured now as a knowing and judging subject in relation to the world, structurally replaces Socrates’ myth of the afterlife in the care of Boethius’ soul. The story of the One who sees eternally now couches the soul and prepares it for its departure, recalling not only a

⁷¹ Boethius, 80.

⁷² Boethius, 80.

⁷³ Boethius, 81.

⁷⁴ Boethius, 79.

form of participation but also refiguring and highlighting themes of analogical imitation and submission discernible in the other writings we have surveyed. In these differences from Stoicism, we can also begin to note the contours of the particular (Christian) notion of providence, which would be so central to later arguments such as Weber's and Löwith's, that emphasizes a particular kind of relation between this world and a space of alterity irreducible to it.

At the close of the *Consolation*, the indivisible cloth of Philosophy is sewn. The acts of weaving reoriented Boethius' perception, and now the finished cloth houses him. In the text's closing words, the garment becomes for Boethius a prayer cloth. The weaving—a now familiar ritualizing practice of ascending repetition through carefully chosen therapeutic arguments—has finally made him the kind of subject who can pray rightly by having a sense of the one to whom he prays. Philosophy's last words to Boethius are as follows:

Hopes are not vainly put in God, nor prayers in vain offered: if these are right, they cannot but be answered. Turn therefore from vice; ensue virtue; raise your soul to upright hopes; send up on high your prayers from this earth. If you would be honest, great is the necessity enjoined upon your goodness, since all you do is done before the eyes of an all-seeing Judge.⁷⁵

Housed in his citadel hewn by the practice of ascending arguments, Boethius is no longer turned downward before the inevitability of his death. He is lifted, ready to face it with a "health-giving state of mind,"⁷⁶ in the company of Philosophy. Through the cloth, or perhaps interwoven in the cloth, Boethius is now able to see himself under the providential care of eternity.

IV. Conclusion: Reflections on Providential Discourse in Christian Thought

While aspects of Boethius' writing resonate with the classical authors surveyed above, the cleavage that appears between God and the world marks the shift of the discourse into a recognizably

⁷⁵ Boethius, 83.

⁷⁶ Boethius, 11.

Christian framework—one in which the divine is temporally and spatially other to the world. As I have suggested above, Boethius' discussion of providence inaugurates the possibility for a relationship with God that supersedes—and perhaps opposes—one's relationship to natural necessity. God relates to the world from eternity, possessing it by means of knowledge in a way that is conceptually prior to the activity of providential ordering. This founds the possibility for human beings to assume a rationally-constituted relationship to a God who "grasps and possesses wholly and simultaneously the fullness of unending life" as the basis *for* a practice of understanding, and even resisting the order of the world. This form of practice aims toward a true understanding of God as *distinct* from the world in order to understand God's—and, accordingly, the self's—appropriate relation to the world. Where Stoic providence emphasized the embodied and ethical practices of attention, inference, and the attendant self-mastery and acclimation to the reality of natural necessity, this Christianized view of providence comes to prioritize the knowledge of God in order to then situate and cultivate virtues of forbearance and hope.

Boethius' depiction of the divine intellect and will in relation to the order of the world, among other early Christian texts, provides the backdrop against which many familiar debates over the relationship between the divine will, knowledge, necessity, and freedom would subsequently take place.⁷⁷ This metaphysical landscape, in other words, sets the terms for a range of later attempts by Christian authors to give an account of how commitment to the Christian God secures and orders the meaning of the world. More than seven-hundred years after Boethius' *Consolation*, the philosophical debate over nominalism and realism deeply divided Christian thought—and ultimately the fabric of European religious, political and ethical life—over precisely the issue of how a transcendent God orders the world.⁷⁸ To the extent that God's will becomes conceptually distinguished from the reality and the

⁷⁷ Lloyd, 156.

order of the world itself—or to the extent that transcendence becomes removed from immanence—one must constantly address the perennial question of how the world’s order expresses or opposes the divine will and the means through which it does so.

This recalls once more the broader question of meaning foregrounded in chapter one. In the classical writings on providence surveyed in this chapter, meaning largely obtains from the particular relation that the self assumes to the order of a world that exceeds the self. Myths, hymns, narratives, prayers dispose the order of the world in such a way that the self can assume its proper place in harmony with it. This work is carried out through the discourse on providence without reference to an external will separable from the order of the world properly perceived. There are ways in which Boethius’ *Consolation* continues this understanding of providence. That is, for Boethius, the discourse on providence brings about the acclimation of the self to necessity through a series of arguments that gradually resignify the order of the world. However, in contrast to the others, Boethius’ writing also opens a way for a different kind of meaning to emerge, one linked to the relationship established between the world and a divine will that operates from eternity, beyond the spatio-temporal limits of immanence. This at least structurally sets the stage for the very notion of meaning that has come under so much scrutiny in modernity: one derived from an authoritative and singular intention.

If attention to Boethius’ writing suggests that early Christian writings on providence both draw deeply from this pre-Christian discourse and respond explicitly to the concrete experience of suffering, Boethius may also be helpful in reminding us that within the Christian discourses on providence, the will of God may employ a notion of meaning that operates through enacting particular relations between

⁷⁸ As discussed in chapter one, the nominalist critique of scholastic realism—often associated with, but not limited to William of Ockham—had an arguably sizeable impact on the course of Christian thought and European (political, ethical, and philosophical) thought more generally. Nominalism is often invoked by secularization theorists and critics, including Blumenberg and Gauchet. The most extended recent treatment of the impact of nominalism on modernity is found in Michael Gillespie’s *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

the order of things. For example, near the end of Philosophy's teaching, she instructs Boethius that it is better to understand divine providence in primarily spatial terms rather than temporal terms:

And so, should you want to ponder the foresight by which God distinguishes all things, you will more accurately determine that it is not a foreknowledge as of something that is to come, but rather a knowledge of a never-failing present. From these considerations, it is not named Providence [*praeventia*, foresight] but Providence [*providentia*, looking out], because, established far from the bottommost things, it looks out at all things as if from some lofty head of things. Well then! Do you demand that the things that the light of the divine eye passes over come about as necessary things, when not even human beings cause the things that they see to be as necessary things? Why would you? Surely your gaze does not add any necessity to those things that you perceive as present? Hardly. And yet, if there is any worthy comparison between the divine present and the human present—just as you humans see certain individual things in this time-bounded present of yours, he perceives all things in his own eternal present. And it is for this reason that this divine foreknowledge does not change the nature and the distinctive character of things; it looks at such things as are present to it just as they will eventually come to pass in time as future things.⁷⁹

This particular argument for the relationship between God and the world emphasizes God's relation to the disposition of worldly things *as a whole* alongside God's general affirmation of the independent natures of created things. For the character Boethius, this teaching does not suggest that he may occupy the lofty peak and gaze on the world or that the intentions of God may become transparent; rather this teaching returns Boethius to his own concrete circumstances with the assurance that even that moment is upheld and contained by a divine interest and activity in the material order of the world and its events. As Philosophy argues in closing

For such is the force of this knowledge, that it has itself established the status of all things.... Therefore, all of you: Avoid vices, cherish virtues; raise up your minds to blameless hopes; extend your humble prayers into the lofty heights. Unless you want to hide the truth, there is a great necessity imposed upon you—the necessity of righteousness, since you act before the eyes of a judge who beholds all things.⁸⁰

The eternal gaze Boethius' writing depicts is one in which every moment of existence is upheld as the location of the self's work, and it is the necessity of righteousness that disposes the true order of the

⁷⁹ Boethius, 81.

⁸⁰ Boethius, 82-3.

world and the attendant work of the self. In this way, the analogy secured between God and the self fundamentally anchors the sense in which the order of the world is meaningful.

As a brief point of contrast, one may find the link between providence, the meaning of life and suffering, and divine intention much more strongly articulated in Augustine's writing than in that of Boethius. Augustine's prior appropriation of providence within a Christian framework takes on a somewhat different tone, in part because of its more temporally-oriented *telos*. While Augustine's particular view of the nature of providence would take different forms across his long and prolific career—shifting alongside his views of freedom and grace—his general approach to providence often emphasizes the legibility of the present in terms of the future to which it is aimed. In the words of Brenda Deen Schildgen, Augustine saw the ultimate purpose of life as determined by its teleology, a characteristic that distinguished him from classical and earlier Christian thinkers who maintained a more participatory approach to the good life, "for whom civic action, citizenship, and nobility of soul were inevitably aligned."⁸¹ Particularly in passages where Augustine addresses the meaning of suffering, this can have the effect of directing the reader's attention toward the ultimate purpose of suffering rather than relating the self toward the necessity of suffering. Along these lines, Wendy Raudenbush Olmsted, compares Augustine's *Confessions* with Boethius' *Consolation* as follows:

Both works construct a positive idea of God as creator and sustainer of the cosmos, but only the *Confessions* enacts a dialectical discovery of a positive idea of God as the good that can guide particular human choices and actions. In book five of the *Consolation* Lady Philosophy outlines a doctrine that makes God a being who has intellect, that is, who grasps simultaneously and eternally the meaning of changing particulars. Instead of providing a content that can inform positive choices and actions, this transcendent intellectual God makes possible a human *apatheia* toward partial goods and provides grounds for the confidence that whatever may befall a good man will be good for him insofar as he is good.⁸²

⁸¹ Brenda Deen Schildgen, *Divine Providence: A History: The Bible, Virgil, Osorius, Augustine, and Dante* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012), 73-4.

⁸² Wendy Raudenbush Olmsted, "Philosophical Inquiry and Religious Transformation in Boethius's 'The Consolation of Philosophy' and Augustine's 'Confessions'," in *The Journal of Religion* 69:1 (Jan., 1989): 19.

Augustine's approach, in other words, tends to orient a person temporally to direct activities toward certain ends; it associates goodness as something that obtains more pointedly from purpose with respect to God than from relationship to God.

There is a sense, then, in which the meaning of suffering in Augustine's work connects more apparently to a purported purposes *for* suffering, rather than part and parcel of immanent necessity. This suggests that when we consider the forms of practice elicited by or related to arguments about providence, the role of suffering shifts from a category of self-cultivation to a category of divine glory in which God's will is inscrutably (yet assuredly) ordering evil for the ultimate ends of good. In this move, providential discourse continues to weave a story of the order of things *writ large*, yet it tends more easily to subsume the concrete concerns of human life into the larger narrative of divine justice. And as Lloyd points out, this can sometimes lead Augustine to suggest the kind of view that we have seen concerns Weber (chapter one): that human suffering assumes a definite and positive meaning within a larger tapestry sewn by the unified divine purpose.⁸³

One would be mistaken, however, to automatically assume that the movement of providential discourse into a Christian framework signals an inevitable turn toward providence as a *merely* abstract, explanatory discourse rather than one aimed at using language to practically situate the self in the world. Indeed, Richard R. Niebuhr's *Experiential Religion* (1972) argues for the potential of even teleological accounts of providence—of precisely the sort one can discern in Augustine's writing, or some readings of Calvin—to serve a concrete, practical function by situating a believer affectively,

⁸³ Lloyd notes, for example, Augustine's willingness to give a purpose to the suffering of children in his relatively early work, *On the Free Choice of the Will*:

Augustine's version of providence is in many ways a stark transformation of the ancient idea of cosmic order. It seems to require acceptance not only of Christian theology but also of the apparent ruthlessness providence exercises in bringing evil into order. The apparent harshness of the providential calculus comes out in Augustine's chilling discussion of the suffering of children in *De Libero Arbitrio Voluntatis* 3.23.229–231. Here he argues that it is right that this suffering should occur, for God works some good by correcting the sinful adults who are tortured by the sickness and death of children dear to them (143).

experientially and intellectually to better face the inevitability of suffering. Niebuhr gestures to the practical force of even later, intentionality-driven notions of divine providence in the following passage:

The profession that God governs the course of human affairs for good is a judgment which puts together the hazards and fortuitous moments of life... and affirms that this whole of experience—incomplete, asymmetrical, and often dissonant—is good. It is good not “on balance” or despite the evil in it, but good because it is the vehicle of God’s intentions. That is, moreover, for a believer the only real goodness that one can lay hold on in experience. One need only read the parables of the Kingdom, the *Confessions* of Augustine, or the *Institutes* [of Calvin] to see that these believers do not attempt to find proportion, symmetry or relation, compensation, or balance within the field of their experience, within their own lives or the lives of others. “Providence” is not an answer to Jesus’ question: Why did the tower fall on these men?... If anything, as “doctrine” providence sets aside visibility of pattern and symmetry within personal experience. When, therefore, a person wrestles with the unlikeness of today to yesterday, with the randomness and disparateness of the elements of his own life-course and ambience, and then looks to the doctrine of providence for a method of eliciting clarity, balance, and equity where otherwise they do not appear, one can only end by doubting the meaning of the belief itself. One doubts the belief of a providing-God, because the providence for which one looks and does not find is a providential ordering of his own history. But in the mind of Jesus or Augustine, believing in God-providing expresses confidence in an order not in the history of the self but in the works of God, an order not within the time of the individual’s birth and death but an infinite order, to which the birth, life, and death of the individual belong.⁸⁴

This reading of the practical force of one’s belief in the doctrine of providence bears a striking similarity to the central feature of the discourse on providence that I have gathered largely from classical texts in this chapter. That is, it emphasizes that providence works to situate the self within a larger depiction of the order of the world. Crucially, Niebuhr flags an important sense in which even notions of providence that hinge on belief in a divine *purpose* can also serve this function. In other words, he offers a way to understand teleological providential claims as ultimately becoming meaningful in their ability to re-signify the order of the world in a concrete sense—not by imposing an order on the world, but by directing attention back to immanent life as the chosen location of divine activity.

In this chapter, I have argued for an approach to providence as a discourse with a certain meaningful function elicited again and again by vigilance over the inevitability of death or by the

⁸⁴ Richard R. Niebuhr, *Experiential Religion* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1972), 71-2.

sufferings associated with the necessities of mortality. I have supported this argument, first, alongside Lloyd's recent call to re-appraise the ancient doctrine of providence in terms of its formative function rather than its propositional content. Her work helpfully draws attention to the way writing on providence has made use of imaginative and narrative techniques to meaningfully present life precisely in relation to its limitations and necessities, rather than from positing an intention beyond them. I have suggested, in addition, that attention to early written arguments on providence should draw our attention not only beyond the content of providential claims and even beyond the literary dimensions of that content, but also to consider the way arguments draw from and rely upon forms of embodied practice. The following features are among those which are particularly apparent from the texts discussed here: the repetitive nature of arguments on providence; the relation of repeated arguments to a constructed mythical or otherwise embedding structure of meaning; the refiguring of human subjectivity through these argumentative and mythical devices; the relation of varied temporal and spatial frameworks through the discourse on providence; and finally, the recurring use of relational genres in writing on providence, including prayer, dialogue, individual writing practice, and correspondence.

My argument, in short, has been that claims about providence cannot be separated from the concerns that elicit these claims or from the practices that underlie, shape, and perform these claims. I anticipate that attention to early examples of these dimensions at play in writing on providence will guide a more fruitful reading of Calvin's doctrine of providence. Although I have already noted that his view of providence is much more commonly associated with a strong emphasis on the absolute but opaque role of a divine will that orders events for God's own purposes, it is also historically true that Calvin was deeply influenced by classical and especially Stoic works. I argue that the attention paid here to what I have called the discourse on providence will help us to see the ways that this very discourse—in its personal, practical, written, and ritualized dimensions—is very much at play in Calvin's writing.

Because this is the focus of this project, I will take considerably more time to unpack the various layers of my argument in order to situate how Calvin's *Institutes* frames his doctrine of providence, and how providence in turn frames subsequent doctrinal discussions within that work. Ultimately, however, I hope this chapter has prepared a reader to appreciate the way differing notions of meaning are assumed and animated in Calvin's writing, and thus invite consideration into unexpected ways that this discourse on providence may have rematerialized and perhaps shaped ethical and political assumptions in early modernity.

Chapter 3

Approaching Calvin's *Institutes* of 1559: Its Genre and Structure

In the introduction to her 2012 study, *Divine Providence: A History*, Brenda Deen Schildgen discusses the relationship between history and literature. Especially in the last several decades, the notion that history operates straightforwardly as an empirical science has been called into question from at least two angles. On the one hand, scholars such as Hayden White have argued that historiography has largely been organized and given legibility in writing by means of the same devices as fictional literature—through emplotment, the use of metaphors and tropes, irony, synecdoche.¹ On the other hand, Foucault's body of work has drawn attention to the way unquestioned social practices construct conceptual "realities" that become reified by uncritical historiography.² Schildgen notes that increasing awareness of these critiques have led to an interest in so-called hidden histories—to methods of historical research that seek to discover and narrate historical experiences that have been excluded from mainstream historical narratives. "Thus," she writes, "micro-histories, the histories of colonized and exploited, histories of minorities and exiles, or the historical lives of peasants rather than kings and rulers became the subjects of inquiry."³ While she views this development with favor, she also points to an interesting effect of this turn in the scholarship:

One consequence of this approach has been to obscure the fact that canonical works themselves might represent an "insurrection of subjugated knowledge." A canonical work today may have been sidelined when it was composed or even in its reception history. Thus,

¹ See Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

² Foucault's most concise discussion of critical history can be found in his essay, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977). This essay is in part a reading of Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History* (New York: Cosimo Books, 2010).

³ Brenda Deen Schildgen, *Divine Providence: A History: The Bible, Virgil, Osorius, Augustine, and Dante* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012), 7.

important as discovering long-ignored facts of human history, and therefore filling in important gaps in our historical understanding has been, we have simultaneously tended to ignore how writers who have been received as canonical or authoritative may themselves have confronted historical lapses or grand presuppositions.⁴

In other words, Schildgen argues that re-reading a complex and influential piece of writing from the past may function similarly to a peoples' history by confronting readers with apparent incongruences—overlooked and forgotten complexities and multiplicities that may themselves subvert mainstream historical assumptions. The refusal to merely summarize the argument of even a “familiar” or “authoritative” text, but to instead read it closely, may therefore work as a form of critical history.⁵

In the previous chapter, I argued that attention to the written disposition of early writings on providence may allow us to approach the doctrine differently than it has often been approached in and after modernity. In this case, a close reading reminds us, for one, that arguments about providence have long been shaped and responsive to concrete concerns about life and death. In addition, such writings take on different kinds of meaning when a reading attends to the array of practices that are a) animated in writing itself, and b) frame the occasion or inscribed context of the text. In short, I argued that something important is lost when arguments about providence are merely summarized or re-stated as propositional claims. That is, a reader risks forgetting the sense in which providence was a form of

⁴ Schildgen, 7.

⁵ While I agree in general with Schildgen's argument about trends in historiography, it should be noted that Foucault, Jacques Derrida, to some extent Giorgio Agamben, and others have performed close readings of canonical or authoritative texts in the name of critical history and critical theory. In chapter one, I already discussed Agamben's call to do precisely this kind of work in *The Signature of All Things* (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 2009) and his efforts to do so in *The Kingdom and the Glory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011). For other important examples, see Foucault's readings of Stoic writings in “About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self” in *Religion and Culture*, ed. Carrette (New York: Routledge, 1999) and *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2001). The clearest examples, however, may be found in many works by Jacques Derrida, including: “Before the Law,” trans. Avital Ronell, in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1991); *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials,” trans. Ken Frieden, in *Languages of the Unsayable*, ed. Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 3-70; *On the Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995); *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994); “Plato's Pharmacy” in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: The Athlone Press, 1981), 61-172.

work mediated primarily through argument, and thus became meaningful *as* a work of repeatedly enacting a structure fit for life.

In this chapter and the next, I will lay the groundwork for a reading of John Calvin's doctrine of providence particularly as it appears in his 1559 *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. My reading will differ from other treatments to the extent that it brings forward, sometimes explicitly and sometimes implicitly, the various theoretical and methodological commitments I have outlined thus far. Following chapter two, I will offer a reading that is specifically interested in the concrete concerns—individual, collective, and historical—that elicit Calvin's writing on providence. I will also give ample attention to the forms of practice that dispose the arguments Calvin offers—practices both suggested by the arguments on providence in particular, and practices animated by the work as a whole and which therefore surround and situate Calvin's arguments of providence. And following chapter one, I will remain alert to how Calvin's writing on providence figures the world in a larger symbolic sense, and consider both its intended and likely-unintended ethical and political effects. In this sense, my work will act as a form of critical history in the sense suggested by Schildgen. By limiting my attention to one "canonical" text (the 1559 *Institutes*) and embarking on a close, layered reading of that text, I aim to give an account of how Calvin's writing relates ideas and practices—theologically, ethically, and politically—in ways that may allow readers to understand both the sixteenth century and the present with more nuance.

In the next three chapters I will give attention not only to Calvin's chapters on providence but also to the work as a whole, effectively reading it in a spiral from the outside in to providence and back out again. I will begin with questions of genre, structure, and how the text itself suggests it should be read by examining its front matter and opening pages. In the next chapter, I will focus more closely on how Calvin understands the sequence of doctrinal discussions that comprise the *Institutes* to be working

in a pedagogical sense—or his precise understanding of what knowledge of God is, how it should be pursued, and the ends to which it should lead. These two chapters will prepare for chapter five, in which I give an exposition of the doctrine of providence and ultimately relate it in a more concrete way to the array of doctrinal discussions that follow it. The last chapter will therefore lead back to the whole by concretizing and filling out the pedagogical framework that occupies my interest in this chapter and the next. Calvin’s text displays what in many ways are the features of any didactic text insofar as it weaves a narrative, animates relationships between various sorts of persons and settings, and works to refocus some aspect of the world it frames. Like any singular text read in detail, however, the *Institutes* does so by recourse to a distinctive deployment of recognizable genres and forms of theological argumentation. To understand the uniqueness of Calvin’s treatment of providence, its relation to his larger commitments regarding Christian pedagogy and signification, and thus the way it operates within his own text to elicit or animate living practices, it is crucial to take into account the way in which his arguments are persuasive within the text as a whole.

I. Entering the Text: Discerning Its Relationships and Aims as set out in the Preface

This section will begin to examine the specific features that render this text the means of a certain kind of pedagogical formation—in other words, the features that actively dispose the content of the text in a particular manner. What does the text set out to accomplish, and what are the specific forms of writing through which it hopes to shape the dispositions of readers?

Let us begin, once more, at the beginning: by retracing our steps briefly back to the prefatory pages of the final 1559 edition of the *Institutes*, beginning with Calvin’s brief preface titled “John Calvin to the Reader.”⁶ In a different sense, however, these pages are also the end. Because this is the preface

⁶ See my introduction for a brief exegesis of this preface, looking at its features alongside the Latin title, *Institutio Christianae Religionis*.

to the final edition, its pages contain some of the last words that Calvin attached to this text after decades of labor and revision. Those words situate how Calvin saw the work's designated purpose at the end of his effort, and thus the way we embark on reading. I will begin by looking closely at several key portions of "John Calvin to the Reader," and then briefly discuss the significance of the next piece of writing that precedes the first book: Calvin's "Prefatory Address to King Francis I of France." Unlike "John Calvin to the Reader," the prefatory address—which was written in 1536—is among the oldest words that remain in the *Institutes*. Although Francis had died in 1547, Calvin insisted that his address be included in the 1559 edition as well as all subsequent publications of the *Institutes*.

Calvin begins his last preface with a clear statement as to its significance over and above the several previous iterations of texts under the same title:

Although I did not regret the labor spent [on previous editions], I was never satisfied until the work had been arranged in the order [*ordo*] now set forth. Now I trust that I have provided something that all of you will approve. In any event, I can furnish a very clear testimony of my great zeal and effort to carry out this task for God's church [*Ecclesiae dei*]. Last winter when I thought the quartan fever was summoning me to my death, the more the disease pressed upon me the less I spared myself, until I could leave a book behind me that might, in some measure, repay the generous invitation of godly men [*piorum*, or "the pious"].⁷

Let us pause again to flag the most obvious and compelling question this passage elicits: *Why* was Calvin never satisfied with the text's *ordo* until now? What is significant about the structure he deployed in 1559? This is a question that I will ultimately address at the end of this chapter, after I have surveyed several layers of generic features that I argue shed light on this question.

For the time being, then, let us still hold this question in suspense in order to perform some necessary exegesis of the preface. Calvin's gesture toward ultimate satisfaction with the 1559 order of his *Institutio Christianae Religionis* is embedded within several networks of relationships: his aim to

⁷ *Institutes*, 3. Note that I use single pages to refer to the front matter of Calvin's 1559 *Institutes* as ordered in the McNeill edition. All references to passages in the main four books use the customary threefold citation of book, chapter, and section number (i.e., 1.1.1).

contribute a work of quality to “God’s Church” in widest terms; the urgency brought about by his own failing health;⁸ and the immediate context of his “pious” interlocutors. Already, the character of this text is openly situated at the threshold of word and life, using words to recall and frame sets of living relationships and acknowledging the way in which those relationships have given birth to words.⁹ These sentences moreover ground several thematic cataracts that flow deeply throughout the *Institutes*: the emphasis on order; the context of the Church—prior, it should be noted, to scripture, which has yet to be named; awareness of and concern over suffering and impending death; the animation of living conversation inflected in the text itself; and the invocation of “piety,” which operates at a much deeper level in Calvin’s work than the mere flattery it may seem to offer here.

As noted already, piety [*pietas*] invokes an ethical and civic virtue central to the classical rhetorical tradition in which Calvin himself was well trained; in addition, however, Calvin’s use of the term recalls Augustinian exhortations to charity and faith as prerequisites for properly receiving sacred

⁸ Calvin’s inordinate and nearly life-long bodily sufferings are detailed in Bruce Gordon’s recent biography, *Calvin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009). See especially pp. 278-9.

⁹ Calvin himself welcomed the analogical invocation of families constituted by textual relation; he once acknowledged as much to a critic who had the poor taste to cast aspersions on Calvin’s lacking a biological offspring: “Yes... the Lord has given me a son; he has taken him from me. Let my enemies, if they see proper, reproach me for this trial. Have not I thousands of children in the Christian world?” See Thomas Smyth, *Calvin and His Enemies: A Memoir of the Life, Character, and Principles of Calvin* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2009), 176–77. This is interesting not only in terms of thinking about texts as material bodies in premodern thought. But this particular claim also echoes a distinctive early Christian rhetorical move over and against Roman notions of piety. Observe Mark Jordan’s discussion of the relationship between Cicero and St. Ambrose:

Cicero layered his examples from the personal through the familial and the national to the simply human itself conceived as community). In Ambrose, the examples are from “our Scriptures,” which provide Christians the story of their family, their nation, and even their new species. When he speaks of “our elders” or “our fathers,” he means Joshua, Jerubbaal, Samson, and David, the Maccabees, the Hebrew victims of the king of Syria, and the Jews under pharaoh, in Babylonian captivity, or avenging themselves on the Benjamites. Our “father” is Abraham; Moses, “our Moses.”³⁰ The image of children now shows more of its force: being a spiritual child to Ambrose means exchanging biological family for the genealogy traced in (what Christians claim as) Old and New Testaments (Jordan, “Cicero, Ambrose, and Aquinas ‘On Duties’ or the Limits of Genre in Morals,” in *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 33:3 [2005]: 485-502, 493).

teaching.¹⁰ For example, in the opening pages of the *Institutes*, Calvin writes, “We shall not say that, properly speaking, God is known where there is no religion or piety.”¹¹ For Calvin, however, the double resonance of the term as both communal and epistemic is retained. The pious subject is one who willingly enacts his or her submission to the right order of teaching—or the order through which, by cultivating piety, one can not only *obtain* but also best *use* the teaching one has received. This framework around piety as a disposition conducive to pedagogy in the fullest sense is expanded in the following passage that comes from book one’s opening pages:

Not only does [God] sustain this universe (as he once founded it) by his boundless might, regulate it by his wisdom, preserve it by his goodness, and especially rule mankind by his righteousness and judgment... but also no drop will be found either of wisdom and light, or of righteousness or power or rectitude, or of genuine truth, which does not flow from him, and of which he is not the cause. Thus we may learn to await and seek all these things from him, and thankfully to ascribe them, once received, to him. For this sense of the powers of God is for us a *fit teacher of piety, from which religion is born*. I call “piety” that *reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of his benefits induces*.¹²

Piety is not presented as a teaching in itself; piety is not a doctrine, but is rather the dispositional prerequisite and outcome of a teaching. It stands in relationship to the circumstances that surround the activity of human cultivation: first to that which escapes human knowledge—God’s boundless might, righteousness, priority and transcendence, which ignite the pursuit of the knowledge of God but which begin strictly as objects of sense rather than knowledge per se; and second to the affective and practical

¹⁰ In the next chapter, I will look closer at Augustine’s earlier structure which, although deeply resonant with Calvin’s, emphasizes charity [*caritas*] rather than piety [*pietas*]. One might also think of Anselm’s framing of theology as *fides quaerens intellectum* in his *Proslogion*. Calvin is thus assuming a position among a stream of Christian theologians who view some affective orientation as a prerequisite for cognitive clarity or intellectual progress. One notable work in which interest in this stream of what we might now call “theological method” recurs in the twentieth century is Reformed theologian Karl Barth’s *Fides Quaerens Intellectum* (Pittsburgh: Wipf and Stock Publishing, 1975).

¹¹ *Institutes*, 1.2.1.

¹² *Institutes*, 1.2.1. Emphases mine.

network of benefits that follow from the knowledge once properly attained.¹³ Here and elsewhere, Calvin has little patience for a notion of mere knowledge disconnected from its use or living enactment;¹⁴ the knowledge of God is, in Calvin's writing, relentlessly achieved only when it is both subsequent to piety and aimed toward the "benefits" of God which induce from us love.¹⁵ Piety is therefore not itself the act of teaching or a particular teaching, but is rather the necessary companion to the reception and enactment of teaching.¹⁶ Piety is related to order, then, in that it orders teaching precisely by inducing submission to the divine order of teaching—a disposition of waiting, seeking, desiring—and then by inducing its affective benefits—gratitude, action and love.

These relationships between piety, pedagogy, and the concrete context in which knowledge becomes useful and beneficial continues to be emphasized as one continues reading Calvin's preface. He writes,

¹³ Sense and perception become deeply important categories in book one of the *Institutes*, particularly as Calvin gives an account of precisely how the fall affects the human ability to know God naturally—both through natural senses and by means of the creation. I will discuss this later in this chapter and in the next. See also Paul Helm, "John Calvin, the *sensus divinitatis*, and the noetic effects of sin" in *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 43 (1998): 87-107; and Derek S. Jeffreys, "How Reformed Is Reformed Epistemology? Alvin Plantinga and Calvin's '*Sensus Divinitatis*'" *Religious Studies* 33:4 (Dec., 1997): 419-31.

¹⁴ Serene Jones has also pointed out a fragmentary gesture to this principle of usage as key to Calvin's understanding of the function of language in general. She writes: "In a rare instance in which Calvin actually reflects on the nature of language, he explicitly states that meaning is a function of usage. 'What difference is there between a tyrant and a King? Whatever difference there is, usage rather than etymology or original meaning determines it.'" See Jones, *Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 80n.18. I will also discuss this further in chapter four.

¹⁵ B.A. Gerrish underscores this claim as follows: "To be sure, it would be a setback for our understanding of [Calvin] if we then imagined an opposition in his mind between truth and usefulness, or between theological understanding and practical piety. While he was not interested in useless truth, it would never have occurred to him that a doctrine could be useful if it was not first of all true." See B.A. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993), 17-18. I would only rephrase this to emphasize that the *text* assumes or deploys no such opposition.

¹⁶ This assessment agrees with Richard Muller on the topic of piety. In *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), Muller writes: "Calvin continually exhorts his readers to piety and consistently criticizes authorities and teachings that stand in the way of piety or of the teaching of piety (*doctrina, exercitia, or stadium pietatis*), but he never describes what he is doing as a form of piety. Piety was to be conjoined with 'teaching' or 'doctrine' (*doctrina*): Calvin did not understand it as an exercise separable from his teaching, preaching, and debating" (107).

God has filled my mind with zeal to spread his Kingdom and to further the public good. I am also duly clear in my own conscience, and have God and the angels to witness, that since I undertook the office of teacher in the church [*officiú doctoris in Ecclesia*], I have had no other purpose than to benefit the church by maintaining the pure doctrine of godliness [*sinceram pietatis doctrinam*].¹⁷

Calvin here assumes the traditional role of “doctor of the church,” which until the late sixteenth century signified quite simply, yet powerfully, the role of a teacher.¹⁸ *Sinceram doctrinam*, here rendered “pure doctrine,” could just as easily be translated using a word such as “sound,” “whole,” “real,” “natural” or simply the cognate, “sincere”; the word it modifies, *doctrina*, could be rendered more idiomatically as “teaching.” Furthermore, the clear relationship in the Latin between *doctor* and *doctrina* has been obscured by Battles’ English translation; this connection could be recovered by retaining the technical jargon of “doctor,” which Calvin himself penned, or more generally by recourse to the more familiar English words “teacher” and “teaching.”¹⁹ Finally, Calvin reiterates that the setting for this pedagogical endeavor is the church [*Ecclesia*], while adding that its aim is not only ecclesial but also public and civic in nature—an aim cemented, yet again, by the use of the term piety [*sinceram pietatis doctrina*].

¹⁷ *Institutes*, 4.

¹⁸ The title of “doctor” became a more official office dedicated to the preservation of church teaching under the Breviary of Pius V in the late 16th century. For a history of these reforms and the creation of formal offices, see Anscar J. Chupungco, *Handbook for Liturgical Studies: Liturgical Time and Space* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2000), 74.

¹⁹ In fact, it is interesting to notice the striking continuities between this language in Calvin’s preface and Thomas Aquinas’ short preface to his *Summa Theologica* (13th cent.), which I quote in its entirety:

Because the doctor of Catholic truth ought not only to teach the proficient, but also to instruct beginners (according to the Apostle: As unto little ones in Christ, I gave you milk to drink, not meat -- 1 Corinthians 3:1-2), we purpose in this book to treat of whatever belongs to the Christian religion, in such a way as may tend to the instruction of beginners. We have considered that students in this doctrine have not seldom been hampered by what they have found written by other authors, partly on account of the multiplication of useless questions, articles, and arguments, partly also because those things that are needful for them to know are not taught according to the order of the subject matter, but according as the plan of the book might require, or the occasion of the argument offer, partly, too, because frequent repetition brought weariness and confusion to the minds of readers. Endeavouring to avoid these and other like faults, we shall try, by God's help, to set forth whatever is included in this sacred doctrine as briefly and clearly as the matter itself may allow (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, preface).

The contextual markers given in the preface for the text as a whole—its setting, its aim, and information concerning its author—have thus far been schematized by Calvin without mention of scripture, which only makes an appearance at the end of the preface. He finally introduces scripture as follows:

Moreover, it has been my purpose in this labor to prepare and instruct candidates in sacred theology for the reading [*lectionem*] of the divine Word [*divini verbi*], in order that they may be able both to have easy access to it and to advance in it without stumbling. For I believe I have so embraced the sum of religion [*religionis summum*] in all its parts, and have arranged it in such an order, that if anyone rightly grasps it, it will not be difficult for him to determine what he ought especially to seek [*quaerere*] in Scripture, and to what end [*scopum*] he ought to relate its contents. If, after this road [*via*] has, as it were, been paved, I shall publish any interpretation of Scripture, I shall always condense them, because I shall have no need to undertake long doctrinal discussions [*dogmatibus longas disputationes*], and to digress into commonplaces [*locos communes*].²⁰

Here, Calvin finally characterizes the textual function of the *Institutes* in the sense that he marks the way it is intended to actually operate toward the end of carrying out religious teaching. Several images in this passage stand out. First, the text is intended to perform in a mediating capacity as a guide in the practice of “reading,” that is, aiding the reader in “determining” and “relating” the divine Word. That which is to be *read* with the aid of the text is, however, not initially referred to as scripture in a reductionist sense. Calvin refers instead to the divine Word or *Verbum*, readily discernible as a reference to the Vulgate rendering of John 1:1: “*In principio erat Verbum et Verbum erat apud Deum et Deus erat Verbum.*” It is the Word made flesh (John 1:14) that most centrally requires theological training to “read.”²¹ We see from the following sentence, however, that the text of scripture likewise plays a role in the larger aim of “religious” formation: namely, it is to be traversed in the pursuit of a

²⁰ *Institutes*, 4-5.

²¹ For a helpful discussion on the significance of “reading” for medieval theological texts, which I will soon treat in more depth, see Peter M. Candler, Jr.’s recent book, *Theology, Rhetoric, Manuduction: Or Reading Scripture Together on the Path to God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

Christian life, but for the explicit purposes of seeking [*quaerere*] and aiming, or pursuing a certain end [*scopus*].

This exegesis of the preface leaves us in a better position to carefully consider the question of genre and to recall, once more, the question with which I began this section: *Why* was Calvin never satisfied with the text's *ordo* until now? And what does this remark have to do with the way the text operates? To address these questions, it is helpful not merely to consider the text's argumentative features or literary styles, but also the complex features through which the *Institutes* achieves its aims of persuasion or pedagogical formation. To do so, I will consider several recognizable forms or genres of Christian writing and teaching which I suggest illumine the productive capacities of Calvin's *Institutes*.²² I will argue that the *Institutes* is addressed, structured, and fully constituted according to a complex variety of recognizable theological and philosophical genres and patterns of teaching. Some of these follow scriptural patterns or aim at scripture itself; others are rooted in wider rhetorical and theological traditions.

Before moving on, however, it is important to note that there are already two recognizable genres of theology that Calvin explicitly invokes in his preface: namely, *disputationes* and *loci communes*. Accordingly, the relationship between Calvin's *Institutes* and other examples of such literature has been explored and generally accepted.²³ My aim in the bulk of this chapter is therefore to

²² In employing the term "genre" here, I follow Jordan's understanding of the term as more than a mere stylistic or structural feature on the surface of a text. Alternatively, according to Jordan, "Some senses of 'genre' go much deeper than ornament or pathos, deeper still than tropes, topics, and disposition. A comparison of genres need not be a comparison of disposition or style or another of the traditional topics in forensic rhetoric. In moral texts, for example, it can turn rather to the conditions under which moral instruction is accomplished - say, the projection of certain conditions for assuming and performing characters or identities." See Jordan, "Cicero," 499-500.

²³ Muller among others has argued that these modes of argumentation define and delimit the *Institutes*' structure and purpose from 1539 onward, and that rather than looking for an overarching systematic theme or key, readers of Calvin would do well to accept the text as an amalgam of theological topics. See *The Unaccommodated Calvin*, pp. 104-8. While I agree that it would be misguided to treat the *Institutes* as a later work of systematic theology by positing a unifying theory, I want to argue that to understand the text merely as a loosely organized set of topics

look in much greater depth at two additional classical and medieval genres which were routinely deployed to shape pedagogical and theological writing: the *enchiridion* and the *itinerarium*. Not only do these genres persuasively illumine several seldom-articulated features of the final version of the *Institutes*, but they also performatively situate and organize many of his argumentative aims. Before moving on, however, I will briefly unpack the features of *disputationes* or disputations, and *loci communes* or commonplaces.

A disputation refers to an extraordinarily common pedagogical practice of the medieval university, one which became virtually ubiquitous as a tool of education from the 12th-15th century. In short, a disputation is a highly structured discussion in which two or more people would assume opposite sides of an argument. Its organizational structure was often as follows: 1) Question, 2) Proposition in Answer, 3) Objections to Proposition, 4) Determination by Master, 5) Answers to Objections. This practice not only structured classroom education and provided a common method for conducting final examinations; it also came to constitute a formal pattern of theological writing, most familiar for modern readers in the work of Thomas Aquinas. As a generic form, the disputation “had the great advantage of focusing attention upon a proposition and upon the ‘proofs’ for that proposition, while allowing maximum flexibility for the consideration of differing opinions. Consequently it was an intellectual tool of great value.”²⁴ In written form, *disputationes* had the effect of representing and thus restaging a multiplicity of positions and rehearsing various stakes in the argument; they also had the effect of inviting a reader into a diachronically active debate around a topic.

would be to miss some very important features of the text’s function both pedagogically and theologically, features which moreover demand our attention because they have the potential to cast the content of Calvin’s teachings in a different light. I will show this with my consideration of other recognizable generic categories in sections two and three of this chapter.

²⁴ James J. Murphy, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages: A History of Rhetorical Theory from St. Augustine to the Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 102-103.

Disputations are embedded, though legible, across the *Institutes*, usually appearing after Calvin has performed some initial argument about a theological topic. The genre or organizing principle invoked by *loci communes*—commonplaces or “topics”—illuminates to a certain extent the order and subject of these disputations. However, the particular significance of this generic feature within Calvin’s work remains a subject of debate. While the ordering of topics was on the one hand a strategy directly traceable as a rhetorical and dialectical method to both Aristotle’s and Cicero’s *Topics*,²⁵ the genre had begun to undergo a distinct shift just prior to Calvin’s time largely due to the popularity of Rudolph Agricola’s *De Inventione Dialectica* (1479). Agricola, a scholar of the classics who played an important role in the Northern Renaissance and whose work was lauded by Erasmus, is credited with subordinating rhetoric to logic in his understanding of the *loci*. In other words, rather than understanding topics as ordered by rhetoric for the purposes of persuasion and according to a logic of participation, Agricola framed commonplaces as representations of a coherent conceptual sequence. This meant, among other things, that logic could now attain a methodical, spatial orientation quite apart from the necessities of experience.²⁶

Calvin’s contemporary and fellow Reformer Philipp Melanchthon’s most well-known work, which bears the title of *Loci Communes* (1521),²⁷ stands as the clearest early example of Agricola’s impact on a nascent Protestant theology in search of a distinctly “scriptural” method. Melanchthon would insist, for example, that “crucial biblical texts are (or provide) *loci* in the sense of ‘seats’ or ‘grounds of arguments,’ while the elicited topics, organized by recourse to a proper method into a coherent sequence, are *loci* in the sense of theological topics... resting on ‘the clear and certain

²⁵ Muller, 108-111.

²⁶ See Muller, 109; Candler, 22-23.

²⁷ The full title of Melanchthon’s work is *Loci communes rerum theologicarum seu hypotyposes theologicae*, or *Common Places in Theology or Fundamental Doctrinal Themes*.

testimonies' of God."²⁸ Melanchthon's claim to strictly scriptural grounding is apparent in the order of his topics, an order that adheres to the Pauline order of teaching found in the Epistle to the Romans: God, creation, sin, freedom of the will, law, gospel, justification, sanctification, the church, and the Sacraments. In the explication of these *loci* alone, Melanchthon thought that the whole of each science could be sufficiently comprehended, making this an early and significant glimpse of what would later come to be known as systematic theology.²⁹

For Calvin, however, the *loci*, like the disputations, present more as a sublimated micro-genre than as a clear ordering principle; in other words, these are visible only implicitly as one among several apparent strategies used to rhetorically organize particular topics within a larger order of teaching. The differences between Calvin's order of topics and that of Melanchthon, for example, are apparent not only from the order of topics but also the style of language. That is, where Melanchthon prefers methodical exposition, Calvin often resorts to imagery, hyperbole, and other features of rhetoric that act persuasively in addition their expository use. Beyond this, however, there are several other more obvious indications that disputations and commonplaces do not exhaust the question of genre and structure with respect to the *Institutes*. For example, one can easily discern Calvin's general adherence to the Apostles' Creed along with vestiges of earlier editions' attention to the Decalogue and the Lord's Prayer. Finally, as I will argue toward the end of this chapter, Calvin's decision to divide his work into four books—each of which clearly relates to a distinct sphere of immanent human life—reflects not a distillation of scriptural teachings but rather a kind of active mediatory function of the text. That is, the text seems designed in part specifically to interface with, clarify, and guide the Christian reader with respect to aspects of human experience.

²⁸ Muller, 110.

²⁹ Simon J. G. Burton, *The Hallowing of Logic* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2012), 48.

I will return to this claim repeatedly, supporting it in a number of ways. One signal of the *Institutes*' deeply contextual interests, however, is found in the other piece of front matter that accompanies Calvin's preface: namely, Calvin's "Prefatory Address to King Francis I of France." This letter confronts a reader like a wild shoot, especially if that reader expects to encounter a timeless work of conceptual theology. Furthermore, Calvin's insistence that the letter remain included even after it would appear outdated or irrelevant suggests, at the very least, that Calvin saw some importance in permanently marking the text with the concrete political circumstances that elicited his theological writing. In the prefatory address, Calvin offers a lengthy defense of the views and activities of the Reformed movement of which he was a part, and for which he was one of many exiled from France. Among the arguments he presents, he gives an account of the reformers' critiques of the church against charges of novelty and schism by attempting to ground the movement in continuity with scripture as well as the teachings of church fathers across centuries. The address ends with an impassioned warning, and a plea: Calvin warns the king that he has come under the deception of the reformers' enemies; and he asks that the reformers' own case be heard without prejudice.³⁰ And throughout, Calvin does little to mitigate the bitter suffering that he believes he and his fellow reformers have undergone as a result of both these church corruptions and their attendant injustices. With the prefatory address, the civic and public dimensions that are hinted at across the text are brought into sharp focus. Calvin's *Institutes* is a theological work that is deeply concerned with the political and civic ramifications of theological teaching. Furthermore, the text foregrounds the fact that this theological project will bring with it the rethinking not only of civic life, but also life in the world more generally. Addressing church corruptions and their attendant political corruptions will mean addressing how human beings know themselves in a more general sense—in relation to the creation as a whole, and in relation to the aids God has provided for Christian pedagogy toward the end of cultivating the religious and civic virtue of piety.

³⁰ *Institutes*, 30-1.

At the end of this chapter, I will show how—and I hope give insight into why—the *Institutes* returns its readers to these overtly political interests in its last pages. Additionally, in the chapters that follow this one, I will be interested in how the doctrine of providence works to connect these threads of theological teaching, reformation of the self, and reformation of the self specifically as a creature and a citizen. Much of this multi-layered work is done as the *Institutes* aims to address and refigure one's understanding of oneself in relation to divine teaching—through the incarnation and scripture. Now, in order to begin this argument in full, I will look at the sense in which the *Institutes* can be understood in relation to the classical philosophical genre of the guidebook.

II. The *Institutes* and the *enchiridion*

The Greek word *enchiridion* literally means “that which is held in the hand” (*enkheiridios*, with the diminutive suffix *-idion*); an English translation able to capture the bodily and material valences of the Greek might be “handbooklet,” or more idiomatically better, “manual.” Philosophical handbooks in the tradition of the *enchiridion* provide a wonderful example of the way premodern philosophical texts were often designed not only to make arguments, but also to activate arguments within a larger field of practice. The *enchiridion* is expressly not a “book” in the sense of a self-contained written totality.³¹ Rather, the *enchiridion* is, in many respects, the epitome of a “moral” text.³² It is fundamentally situated—activated and activating—within a web of practical relationships: it is positioned between teacher and student, emergent out of a philosophical school, and aimed at guiding the student toward correct apprehension of the world more generally. As we will see, however, the genre would see

³¹ This attitude toward the nature of books became prominent with the invention of the printing press and the ability to mass produce bounded books in the absence of schools of reading or long processes of copying. One can also ascertain why the modern material nature of the book would give way to more fixed notions of authorship. The notion of the autonomous and totalized book defined by its reproducible material boundaries and the subjectivity of the author, however, have come under much recent criticism, more notably by Derrida in *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1967).

³² That is, the text is moral in the general sense of pedagogically forming human persons to be better disposed toward a good life.

several incarnations prior to Calvin's work. In order to understand the sense in which the long final edition of the *Institutes* can be helpfully encountered as a 16th century example of an *enchiridion*, I will briefly look at two earlier instances of the genre: the first by Stoic philosopher Epictetus (written approx. 125 CE), and the second several centuries later by Augustine (written approx. 420 CE). I will then assess the ways these shed light on the pedagogical function of the 1559 *Institutes*, an investigation that will begin to engage the text both in form and content.

The *Enchiridion* of Epictetus presents an archetypal instance of a handbook. It is brief, able to be carried in hand, and full of concise exhortations. As such, the text is designed to be read, repeated and recited as one pursues the daily work of moral formation. The goal of the work, for the students of Epictetus, was to cultivate right discernment—to rightly understand the nature of the world's necessity in relationship to the powers of the self. By employing his handbook, Epictetus' students could practice various reminders to guide them in "reading" their situations and learning to form better reactions. Look, for example, at the *Enchiridion's* opening chapter:

Remember that if you mistake what is naturally inferior for what is sovereign and free... you'll meet with disappointment, grief and worry and be at odds with God and man. But if you have the right idea about what really belongs to you and what does not, you will never be subject to force of hindrance.³³

The handbook therefore enters a scene in which a student desires to rightly grasp, or have the right idea about a reality that initially presents itself as obscure or disorienting. The initial state of confusion is not, for Epictetus, the result of pure ignorance: if a person were completely ignorant, she would never recognize herself as someone in need of help. On the contrary, Epictetus claims that human beings are equipped with innate *preconceptions*, or traces of ideas like the good, justice, and the existence of God, but suffer from an inability to effectively apply these ideas in their lives. This leads to a situation of

³³ Epictetus, *Discourses and Selected Writings* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 221.

spiraling confusion and frustration, inflamed by the many false opinions that are generated from this detrimental inability to apply the preconceptions in reality with certainty.³⁴ Addressing this dilemma, Epictetus responds as follows:

So is there no standard for our case beyond opinion? ...There must be one. So let's hunt for it; and once we've found it, let's commit to never making a single move without reference to it. I conceive this discovery as the antidote to the madness that results from exclusive reliance on opinion as the criterion of truth. And from then on, starting with the familiar preconceptions, clearly defined, we will proceed to apply them to particular objects and events in a methodical manner.³⁵

Epictetus here prescribes the exercise of a philosophical practice for discerning the application of the preconceptions to everyday situations. Through the negotiation of argument and experience, one learns to “test” and “weigh” that which one encounters in life in order to distinguish the things which are constant from those which are undependable, eventually distinguishing necessity from contingency and ultimately conforming one's own will to the nature of necessity.³⁶ According to Epictetus,

If your present desires are realistic—realistic for you personally—why are you frustrated and unhappy? If you are not trying to escape the inevitable, then why do you continue to meet with accident and misfortune? ...Begin to fashion your future in such a way that nothing happens contrary to your desire and nothing that you desire fails to materialize.³⁷

Those in pursuit of philosophy are therefore saved—made free, content, and tranquil—by learning, through a series of philosophical practices, how first to bring reality into focus with preconceptions and then passions in alignment with reality. The *Enchiridion* therefore serves a clear pedagogical function in this field of practice—namely, it equips the pupil with a written tool that can be carried close at hand to enable this ongoing set of practices. For Epictetus in particular, the handbook provides a repetition of

³⁴ Epictetus, 98.

³⁵ Epictetus, 100.

³⁶ Epictetus, 100.

³⁷ Epictetus, 118-119.

the teachings of the teacher (or perhaps the *doctrina* of the *doctor*) in short form in order to aid the memory and eventually retrain the student's perceptions, urges and desires.³⁸

In the case of Augustine's *Enchiridion*, which emerged three centuries later and in a vastly different context, we find the same genre distinctly adjusted in style. Contrast, for example, Augustine's opening—addressed to a student who requested the aid of a handbook—from the opening we saw from Epictetus:

Now for human beings, wisdom is the same as piety.... [which] the Greek expresses more clearly as *theosebeia*, which is reverence toward God. There is another word for piety in Greek, *eusebeia*, which means "good reverence," although this chiefly signifies the worship of God. But no word is more suitable to explain what human wisdom is than the one that expressly denotes worship of God.... If I answer that God is to be worshiped with faith, hope and love, you will certainly say that this is a shorter answer than you wish for, and then you will ask for a brief explanation of the objects of each of these three, that is, what we should believe, what we should hope for, and what we should love. But to defend this against the criticism of those who hold a different opinion demands fuller and more laborious teaching: for this it is necessary, not that your hand be filled with a brief handbook, but that your heart be set on fire with great love.³⁹

For Augustine, the function of the handbook involves much more than a series of practices aimed at forming the self in relation to the necessities of everyday life. The goal of Christian teaching functions on a different spatio-temporal plane, and thus affects the perception, sentiment, and desire differently. Rather than emphasizing the reshaping of desire for happiness through the right perception of reality, Augustine aims to reshape desire for God through exercises of faith and hope.

In this sense, Christian formation requires a different order of teaching. Where Epictetus sought to provide simple mantras and aphorisms to aid the reason and memory in recognizing and adjusting to

³⁸ It is interesting to note that a similar instance of the *enchiridion* as a summary of oral teaching could be found in the New Testament book of 1 John, a short text which scholars have found notoriously difficult to categorize. Kenneth Grayston has argued, however, that 1 John is best understood as "neither epistle nor treatise but an *enchiridion*, an instruction booklet for applying the tradition in disturbing circumstances." See Kenneth Grayston, *The Johannine Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 4.

³⁹ Augustine, *Enchiridion on Faith, Hope, and Love* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1999), 33-4.

the nature of necessity, Augustine is interested in the cultivation of sentiments as a result of commitment to the truth of doctrinal tenets. Doctrinal tenets, however, are not strictly a matter of conceptual clarity and rational apprehension, but of humble reception and living guidance. It is thus the truth of Christian teaching that functions as the primary guide. To receive this truth is not simply a matter of self-mastery, but of burning desire properly directed. Augustine continues to reflect on the nature of the *enchiridion* in furthering this aim:

You write that you wish me to make a book for you to keep, what is known as a handbook, never to be let out of your hands, containing an exposition of what you have asked about, namely, what we should seek above all, what we should chiefly seek to avoid because of the various heresies there are, to what extent reason comes to the support of religion, what lies outside the scope of reason and belongs to faith alone, what should be held first and last, what the whole body of a doctrine amounts to, and what is a sure and suitable foundation of Catholic faith.... When a mind is filled with the beginning of that faith which works through love, it progresses by a good life even toward vision, in which holy and perfect hearts know that unspeakable beauty the full vision of which is the highest happiness.⁴⁰

Moral teaching, in this framework, extends well beyond the aim of merely adjusting to the reality of natural necessity. For Augustine, teaching on the good life is ultimately aimed beyond the strict boundaries of earthly life and material necessity; moral teaching cannot occur apart from the tenets of faith—trinitarian, ecclesial, and eternal. The handbook, then, guides a life of faith rather than apprehension, because for Augustine faith (like hope) extends precisely beyond sight—at least until love consummates in vision.⁴¹

Augustine's handbook therefore occupies a more layered relational sphere than that of Epictetus. It is situated between the pupil and the doctrines of faith, while doctrines of faith themselves mediate truth.⁴² Truth is related not to the order of nature alone but more deeply to the divine reality

⁴⁰ Augustine, *Enchiridion*, 34-5.

⁴¹ Augustine, *Enchiridion*, 38.

⁴² When comparing Augustine's *Enchiridion* to that of Epictetus, we see the tenets of faith assume a striking and important role. It is clear even here, however, that the tenets of faith function to shape a subject directed by and

that is located beyond the present situation of the student, thus requiring a posture of belief rather than knowledge: “There is also faith in past realities, in present ones, and in future ones,” according to Augustine.⁴³ The teaching he proceeds to offer in the majority of his *enchiridion* is consistent with the genre insofar as it is aimed at guiding students through recourse to mnemonic devices. First, however, is it notable that the primary mnemonic Augustine follows is not his own teaching, but the Apostles’ Creed, which Augustine receives as a sacred order of teaching designed as *credo*, or to repeatedly aid the memory with regard to matters of *belief*.

Second, Augustine’s *enchiridion* is not itself the Apostles’ Creed, but is meant to accompany it at much greater length; it is, as it were, a much longer guide *to* the guide. As such, the text of the *enchiridion* is one step removed from the primary mnemonic; it explicates the creed, rather than simply presenting it to the student. The text concludes with disproportionately brief treatments of both hope and love. Hope is paired with the Lord’s Prayer, another genre linked to the exercise of memory through recitation, but one which Augustine chooses to interpret much more lightly. Perhaps the prayer, following the structure of address as a petition, inherently requires less guidance. Concerning love, Augustine writes with similar brevity. He describes for his student the gradual sewing together of human lives in charity until the consummation of death, when the need for language ceases and the way is opened to beatific vision.⁴⁴ The love exercised in the church is itself a vision, requiring only a few descriptive words in order to figure the true vision that waits beyond words, yet deferred by temporal life.

toward the aim of divine love. As such, these tenets are not capable in and of themselves of conveying truth or beatitude. I will argue that the same emphasis is true of Calvin’s understanding of faith and the relation of doctrine to faith. More space will be devoted to this topic in the next chapter.

⁴³ Faith in God the Creator, the cause of all things, is the first tenet which Augustine unpacks in the handbook. Augustine, *Enchiridion*, 40.

⁴⁴ Augustine, *Enchiridion*, 133-4.

Augustine's *Enchiridion* therefore differs from Epictetus' in several deliberate ways. One is found in his emphasis on the cultivation of right belief concerning not merely the reality of the immanent world but, even more importantly, the reality of God's transcendent being and action. Submitting to the structure of faith means that teaching is carried out by mimicking, but ultimately deferring, the role of the divine teacher. While text is still used in a mediating capacity aimed at providing a repetitive tool for ongoing moral formation, it functions to elaborate on and point to simpler creedal and petitionary forms. And where for Epictetus the student actively and repeatedly uses the text to hone perception as a precursor to shaping desire, for Augustine the student is directed by the text to live by desiring eternal life. In this sense, text does not merely guide but actually figures reality itself; Augustine's text argues that life itself can only be perceived clearly when it is precisely the desire for the vision of *God* that shapes the trajectory of human life.⁴⁵

Calvin evidently had the classic genre of the *enchiridion* in mind as he composed earlier iterations of the *Institutes*. This is quite apparent in the 1532 text, which Calvin explicitly called a "*breve enchiridion* [brief handbook]." ⁴⁶ While the text continued to expand well beyond such a neat generic category, the significance of the genre in terms of signaling a pedagogical aim remains in later versions of the text. This is not only apparent in Calvin's persistent choice of the name *Institutio*, which marks the text as a pedagogical work with the connotations of a training manual, but also in the specific descriptions he employs to introduce the later versions of the text. For example, in a preface titled

⁴⁵ The consistency of the distinction between the genre of the *enchiridion* and the genre of prayer is also apparent in Erasmus' early 16th century *enchiridion*, which frames "learning" (the aim of the handbook) as the companion to prayer, the two chief "weapons" in the Christian's arsenal. See John W. O'Malley, "Introduction" in *Collected Works of Erasmus: Spiritualia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), xliii. See also Erasmus, "Enchiridion" in *ibid.*, 30-ff.

⁴⁶ See Calvin, *Ionnis Calvini opera quae supersunt omni*, ed. Wilhelm Baum, Edward Cunitz, and Edward Reuss, 15 vols, *Corpus reformationum* 29-89 (Brunsvigae, Schwetschke, 1863-1900), 31:23. See also Randall C. Zachman's helpful discussion in *John Calvin as Pastor, Teacher, and Theologian* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 58.

“Argument du present livre,” which appeared consistently in French vernacular editions from 1539 until being dropped in 1560,⁴⁷ Calvin presents the *Institutes* as follows:

Although Holy Scripture contains a perfect [teaching], to which one can add nothing, since in it our Lord has meant to display the infinite treasures of his wisdom, yet a person who has not much practice in it has good reason for some *guidance and direction*, to know what he ought to look for in it, in order not to wander hither and thither, but *to hold a sure path*, that he may always be *pressing toward the end* to which the Holy Spirit calls him. Perhaps the duty of those who have received from God fuller light than others is to help simple folk at this point, and as it were *to lend them a hand*, in order to *guide them and help them* to find the sum of what God meant to teach us in his Word.... It is very necessary to help in this way those who desire to be instructed in the doctrine of salvation. Consequently, I was constrained, according to the ability that the Lord gave me, to undertake this task. Such was my purpose in composing the present book.⁴⁸

The language of guiding, helping, and even the bodily image of lending a hand clearly evoke the aims of kinds of texts we have surveyed. Furthermore, while the final preface which we have already examined above speaks less vividly about the mediating role of the text, the basic structure remains intact:

Moreover, it has been my purpose in this labor to *prepare* and *instruct* candidates in sacred theology for the reading of the divine Word, in order that they may be able both to have *easy access* to it and to *advance* in it without stumbling. For I believe I have so embraced the sum of religion in all its parts, and have arranged it in such an order, that if anyone *rightly grasps* it, it will not be difficult for him to *determine what he ought especially to seek* in Scripture, and to *what end he ought to relate* its contents.”⁴⁹

Like Epictetus, Calvin provides his students with a text to guide their “determinations” and “ends” while navigating a practice of discernment. Traces of Augustine’s influence are visible, however, in the way

⁴⁷ After the final 1559 edition came out, all subsequent French translations beginning in 1560 merely carried the “John Calvin to the Reader” preface which we have already examined.

⁴⁸ *Institutes*, 6. Emphases are mine. This quote is taken from the English translation of one of Calvin’s French prefaces which is included in the common McNeill edition of Calvin’s *Institutes* under the title, “Subject Matter of the Present Work.” McNeill, however, erroneously claims that this preface appears in the 1560 French edition of the *Institution*. This preface, however, as discussed in the previous footnote, actually appears in every French edition *except* the final 1560 (and thus all subsequent re-prints). For more on this, see Richard Muller, “Calvin’s ‘Argument du livre’ (1541): An Erratum to the McNeill and Battles *Institutes*,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 29:1 (Spring, 1998): 35-8.

⁴⁹ *Institutes*, 4-5, quoted above. Emphases mine.

that Calvin retains the added complexity distinctive to the Christian theological use of the handbook. Not only is the text far longer and more complex, but it is also very clear that the true teacher is *not* Calvin himself, and the privileged source of teaching is *not* his own handbook.

For Calvin, however, two characteristics demand our attention insofar as they point to the novelty of Calvin's reiteration of the handbook genre—and, furthermore, suggest a stronger similarity to Epictetus than one might have expected from such a devoted Augustinian. First, whereas Augustine's text uses the Apostles' Creed and Lord's Prayer as mnemonics within a text that otherwise doesn't look much like a handbook, Calvin retains a much clearer role for *the handbook itself* in the role he gives to scripture.⁵⁰ In this sense, Epictetus' structure of teaching is not so much amended in the service of Christianity as it is redoubled in the service of Christianity. Calvin's status as a teacher and his written handbook function as imitations or simulacra in service of the 'true' teacher and the 'true' handbook. The only true teacher of humanity is God; and the teaching that performs the consummate function of the handbook is, in the final analysis, the revealed *Word*.⁵¹ And moreover, as we shall see, the location of teaching is no longer rooted in a philosophical school, but in the school of the Genevan church—which is another imitation (and reshaping) of the world at large.

Second, Calvin consistently invokes the everyday context of the immanent world as that which scripture serves to clarify. So while the *Institutes* is undeniably a theological text deeply concerned with cultivating faith in and through Christian *doctrina*, there is much stronger attention to the arena of immanent life as the site where teachings on more transcendent matters attain decisive import. We

⁵⁰ The *Institutes* is also structured according to the Apostles' Creed. This will be discussed at some length in the final section of this chapter. What I am pointing out, however, is that Calvin retains the need for a handbook in the classic sense in a way that Augustine does not. He preserves the need for a textual tool to be carried and read in order to better discern the truth of everyday reality. Calvin is therefore not borrowing from the Apostles' Creed to write his own *enchiridion*, he is teaching the use of another true *enchiridion*.

⁵¹ While Calvin's language clearly suggests scripture when he refers to "the sum of what God meant to teach us in his Word," particularly the preposition "in," it is important to note that he maintains the theological ambiguity between the incarnated Word and the written, scriptural Word.

have already seen this above in our discussion of Calvin's characteristic emphasis on knowledge being incomplete without attention to its *benefits*. Noting the ways in which his text "works" as a handbook in relation to concrete life will bring us a step closer to grasping the way words relate to life more generally and provide a distinctive interrelation of immanence and transcendence—one which will deeply inform his contribution to the discourse on providence.

With these characteristics in mind, let us go deeper into the text in order to grasp the function of the handbook for Calvin more concretely. The opening chapter of Book I of the *Institutes* bears some interesting structural similarities to what we have seen in Epictetus' notion of preconceptions.⁵² It begins with the analogical claim that the knowledge of God and the knowledge of humanity are related to one another, but that the relation is one of both dissimilarity and similarity.⁵³ On the one hand, Calvin writes: "To this extent we are prompted by our own ills to contemplate the good things of God; and we cannot seriously aspire to him before we begin to become displeased with ourselves."⁵⁴ On the other hand, the reason we are able to attain a sense of displeasure in comparison to God is because Calvin believes we carry a positive "sense of the divine." According to Calvin, "There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity [*sensus divinitatis*]. This we take to be beyond controversy. To prevent anyone from taking refuge in the pretense of ignorance, God has

⁵² Epictetus and, of course, others associated with Stoicism. For a historical account of Calvin's appropriation of the Stoic notion of preconception is discussed, largely with reference to Cicero, in Edward Adams, "Calvin's View of the Natural Knowledge of God," *The International Journal of Systematic Theology* 3:3 (November, 2001): 280-92, 284-5.

⁵³ See the well-known opening lines of Calvin's *Institutes*, book one: "Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But, while joined by many bonds, which one precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to discern. In the first place, no one can look upon himself without immediately turning his thoughts to the contemplation of God, in whom he "lives and moves." For, quite clearly, the mighty gifts with which we are endowed are hardly of ourselves; indeed, our very being is nothing but subsistence in the one God. Then, by these benefits shed like dew from heaven upon us, we are led as by rivulets to the spring itself. Indeed, our very poverty better discloses the infinitude of benefits reposing in God" (1.1.1).

⁵⁴ *Institutes*, 1.1.1.

implanted in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty.”⁵⁵ Like a preconception, the *sensus divinitatis* accounts for the basic human ability to aspire to things like order, goodness, or justice. For Calvin, however, the *sensus divinitatis* functions not only as the trace of these ideas, but also as a sense faculty that enables God’s glory to be seen in the natural world as a kind of peripheral flicker—in and behind the natural world. It is, then, akin to an experience of the divine intertwined within the immanent. Calvin calls it a “natural instinct,”⁵⁶ “naturally inborn in all and fixed deep within, as it were in the very marrow.”⁵⁷ It is a natural means through which humans behold not just the world as raw material, but as “divine art.”⁵⁸ Calvin even adds that it would not be altogether wrong to say that “nature is God,” provided that it “proceeds from a reverent mind” which understands that nature is properly the “order prescribed by God.”⁵⁹ The association between the two, however, is so close that Calvin is willing to disrupt the easier linearity of the latter statement. The emphasis on a context of immanence as the site for perceiving the divine, however, is clearly foregrounded in the earliest pages of the *Institutes*.

For Calvin, however, the dissimilarity that accounts for the distance between humanity and the knowledge of God—and the need for teaching—has to do with the corruption brought about by human sin, leading to instances of systemic misapprehension and false opinion.⁶⁰ For Calvin, in a way that again

⁵⁵ *Institutes*, 1.3.1.

⁵⁶ *Institutes*, 1.3.1.

⁵⁷ *Institutes*, 1.3.3.

⁵⁸ *Institutes*, 1.5.1-3. It should be noted that a close reading of this concept bears little resemblance to contemporary ideas of intelligent design. Calvin is not offering a rational argument for a certain kind of material requiring a certain kind of intelligent cause, but rather the simultaneous experience of nature *as* art. If anything, Calvin’s view is much closer to the Stoic view that the difference between nature, chaos, and providence are located in persuasion concerning the whole and the mind’s relation to the world rather than in the raw matter of the world itself. See the second section of chapter two.

⁵⁹ *Institutes*, 1.5.5.

⁶⁰ *Institutes* 1.4.1.

recalls Epictetus, the results of this malfunction are devastating to human wellbeing. Calvin writes, “They do not therefore apprehend God as he offers himself, but imagine him as they have fashioned him in their own presumption. When this gulf opens, in whatever direction they move their feet, they cannot but plunge headlong into ruin.”⁶¹ Where humans ought ideally to live with contentment in relation to a reality constituted by knowledge of the true God, the misfiring of the divine sense—which is trained to seek the divine, in a sense that could not be more Augustinian—constantly leads to the proliferation of idols. Calvin writes:

In seeking God, miserable men do not rise above themselves as they should, but measure [God] by the yardstick of their own carnal stupidity, and neglect sound investigation; thus out of curiosity they fly off into empty speculations. They do not therefore apprehend God as he offers himself, but imagine him as they have fashioned him with their own presumption... for they are worshiping not God but a figment and a dream of their own heart.”⁶²

The psychological repercussions of this are profound and undergird Calvin’s famously rich phenomenology of human sin. When Calvin speaks of sin’s effects, he does not simply follow Augustine in describing privation or disordered desire, but outlines the vivid cognitive disorientation and emotional turmoil of “dullness” and “dread.” Human beings, for Calvin, are deeply affected by an idea of God that surrounds them but ultimately overwhelms, exceeds, and escapes them.⁶³ They therefore react to the distorted and misapplied sense of the divine presence as those struck by fear and confusion, “dread even to the point of loathing.”⁶⁴ There is a “confused knowledge” brought by recognition of and resistance to an “inescapable power” that “hangs over them.”⁶⁵

⁶¹ *Institutes*, 1.4.1.

⁶² *Institutes*, 1.4.1.

⁶³ *Institutes*, 1.3.3.

⁶⁴ *Institutes*, 1.4.4.

⁶⁵ *Institutes*, 1.4.4.

We see, then, a much stronger repetition of Epictetus' structure of teaching than we saw in Augustine. For Epictetus, human beings possess preconceptions but are unable to apply them correctly, being led away from a sound analysis of present reality by innumerable confusions, desires, and opinions. For Calvin, human beings are endowed with a sense of the divine that meets them at every glance but is constantly distorted—though never entirely effaced⁶⁶—by human sin. This results in a misapprehension of the divine in the world at every turn, causing angst, fear, and constant frustration. And it is this structure which is remedied by a teaching very much concerned not just with achieving union with God after death, but with learning to discern the divine glory in the world and in the self at every level.

This leads, finally, to Calvin's well known emphasis on the importance of scripture *as a text*. In certain respects, one can account for this emphasis by invoking Calvin's historical situation: Reformation critique opted to put unprecedented weight on the scriptural text in order to resist and undermine the authority of the established church. In Calvin's case, however, his consistency with fellow Reformers on the elevation of scripture is accompanied by a positive and distinctive role for scripture in a larger scheme of Christian practice—a role that recalls the characteristic qualities of the *enchiridion* itself.⁶⁷ For instance, see the well-known language Calvin uses to introduce scripture for the first time in the body of the text, in chapter six of Book I:

Just as old or bleary-eyed men and those with weak vision, if you thrust before them a most beautiful volume, even if they recognize it to be some sort of writing, yet can scarcely construe two words, but with the aid of spectacles will begin to read distinctly; so Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly

⁶⁶ *Institutes*, 51.

⁶⁷ Those who are interested in locating Calvin's theological originality might do well to look at scripture, although originality is often (and is in this case) synonymous with recombination.

shows us the true God. This, therefore, is a special gift, where God, to instruct the church, not merely uses mute teachers but also opens his own most hallowed lips.⁶⁸

The familiar structural need for a teacher and a guiding text is once more apparent, a need which for Calvin is ultimately met by God and the scriptural text. Where Epictetus' *Enchiridion* supplied mantra-like phrases to guide a person through the vicissitudes of life by correcting their misconceptions, Calvin frames the text of scripture as the clarifying lens to steady one experiencing the vertigo of a misapprehended reality.

While Calvin places an enormous amount of faith in scripture as the text uniquely adapted to serve in this teaching capacity, it is important to recognize that scripture remains, for Calvin, precisely that: a text that serves in a certain capacity. This surely pushes against the tendency of many to read Calvin as looking to scripture *for reality itself*. Reading the pedagogical aim of Calvin's text in the context of the *enchiridion* attunes us to notice that Calvin's understanding of "reality" is not concentrated in a text but in the concrete arena of *life*, in the "creation" through which the glory of God is manifest. Scripture serves as the handbook given to enable this reading of creation, in Calvin's view, by the graciousness of humanity's ultimate teacher, God himself.

We therefore find both structural and argumentative features in the early pages of the *Institutes* that signal a role for the signification of the text as one of participation *in* a wider scheme of signifying reality rather than merely mapping or containing arguments after the fashion of mere post-Agricolan *loci communes*. Calvin's text sets out to be a guide to a guide, a teaching to prepare students for teaching. When we are able to glimpse the way scripture functions for Calvin in the wider scene of his writing—in relation to the integral role played by his understanding of the *sensus divinitatis*—it becomes difficult to recite the claim that Calvin locates dogmatic certainty in the scriptural text itself. If the

⁶⁸ *Institutes*, 1.6.1.

rhetorical shape of the text locates certainty anywhere, it is in the assertion that one who approaches the reading of scripture with circumspection and piety cultivated by the *Institutes* will certainly progress toward a habituated clarity in reading the glory of God in every aspect of life. This leads to the final section of this chapter, which follows in a similar vein ascertaining the sense in which Calvin's *Institutes* can be understood to act as an *itinerarium*.⁶⁹

III. The *Institutes* as an *Itinerarium*

a. Background on itineraria

Hearing the word "*itinerarium*," readers familiar with medieval theology are likely to think of Bonaventure's exquisitely crafted 13th century work, *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*. Historians will be more likely to think of Roman cartography, or perhaps the Christian adaptation of such texts as medieval pilgrimage guides. The modern English word "itinerary" captures some of what the Latin suggests—instruction, direction, measurement, goal. A glance at contemporary examples of maps and manuals, however, affirms the impact of the modern tendency toward disciplinary compartmentalization. Modern maps do not evoke or create a certain affective disposition or work to reshape the faculties of the intellect; they get you from one place to another with efficiency. Many contemporary readers have come to expect this from texts—in other words, readers often approach a text as if reading it means downloading its information, whether for business or for pleasure. This expectation, however, can obscure the way in which many premodern (and even many modern) texts draw on the relation and integration of signs, whether linguistic or material, in order to reorient human subjectivity rationally, emotionally, and materially. Bonaventure's *Itinerarium*, for example, neither works as a mere step-by-

⁶⁹ It should be noted that Calvin never actually uses the term "*itinerarium*" to describe the *Institutes*. However, it was not uncommon for a number of medieval theological texts which share the features of a theological *itineraria* to similarly withhold the term, as we will see in the next section with the aid of Peter Candler's work. What is important for my argument is that the features of theological *itineraria* are enacted and stated in the construction of the text.

step travel guide, nor as a merely philosophical articulation of the human faculties, nor as a simple exhortation to certain moral qualities or affections. Observe, instead, the language of the text's prologue:

Following the example of our most blessed father Francis, I was seeking this peace with panting spirit—I a sinner and utterly unworthy.... It happened that about the time of the thirty-third anniversary of the Saint's death, under divine impulse, I withdrew to Mount La Verna, seeking a place of quiet and desiring to find there peace of spirit. While I was there reflecting on various ways by which the soul ascends into God, there came to mind, among other things, the miracle which had occurred to blessed Francis in this very place: the vision of a winged Seraph in the form of the Crucified. While reflecting on this, I saw at once that this vision represented our father's rapture in contemplation and the road by which this rapture is reached. The six wings of the Seraph can rightly be taken to symbolize the six levels of illumination by which, as if by steps or stages, the soul can pass over to peace through ecstatic elevations of Christian wisdom.... The six wings of the Seraph, therefore, symbolize the six steps of illumination that begin from creatures and lead up to God, whom no one rightly enters except through the Crucified.⁷⁰

Bonaventure's *Itinerarium* is a journey that involves body and soul, student and teacher, location and destination, specific time and sacred time, action and contemplation, desire, humility, and love. In many of these respects, it shares qualities of the *enchiridion*. The text enables a certain kind of living formation through activating memory and desire in the pedagogical context of a teacher and a school. For the *itinerarium*, however, the spatio-temporal progression of teaching is made more explicit. The Latin root, *iter*, means journey. When teaching assumes the form of an *itinerarium*, it takes on the character of a journey with a particular path, particular exercises calibrated to stages of the path, all aimed at a particular goal. In order to properly assess how our reading of the *Institutes* can be enhanced by our becoming attuned to the aims and tactics of the *itinerarium*, I will begin by looking more closely at the historical features of that genre.

By naming his work an *itinerarium*, Bonaventure elided a work of theology with a Latin genre originally designed as a practical guide for travel. Throughout the Roman Empire, *itineraria* were

⁷⁰ Bonaventure, *The Soul's Journey Into God* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1978), 54-5.

written and used to guide travelers from one place to another. Recent readers of such maps, however, have often puzzled at the flourishes that accompany what appear to be otherwise scientifically-calculated geographies. Take, for example, the 5th century CE *Tabula Peutingeriana*, which seems intended to serve as a practical guide for actual travelers, but contains what seem to be both extraneous aesthetic flourishes *and* carefully rendered topographical features (see figure three).⁷¹ In the words of Scott Fitzgerald Johnson, “If it is merely a route map, or primarily meant to adorn, what is the virtue of minutely rendered (and often accurate) Mediterranean coastlines?”⁷²



Figure 3: Detail of the *Tabula Peutingeriana* (first-fourth century CE, fasc. 1887-8)

Such apparently incongruous features suggest that ancient maps aimed not simply to “specialize” in one form of knowledge but rather to gather together layers of scientific, cosmological, astrological, and mythological truths aimed at guiding travelers in an multi-layered yet integrated sense—persuading

⁷¹ The *Tabula Peutingeriana*, or Peutinger Table (named for the 15-16th century German antiquarian Konrad Peutinger) is a guide to Roman imperial roads along the Mediterranean coast, including Constantinople, Persia, north Africa, and Italy.

⁷² Scott Fitzgerald Johnson, “Travel, Cartography, and Cosmology” in *Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*, ed. Scott Fitzgerald Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 571.

them toward a fuller aesthetic and vital relation to the land, contextualizing the larger meanings of the journey itself.⁷³

Bonaventure, however, would have been most familiar with the *itinerarium* in its medieval Latin form, in which the travel guide took a more Christian-centric shape as a pilgrimage guide. The earliest known example of a Christian *itineraria*, the *Itinerarium Burdigalense* (*Bordeaux Pilgrim*, 333 CE), provides both practical guidance, such as mileages and way stations, as well as sacred monuments to lead the traveler to the city of Jerusalem.⁷⁴ When the map arrives at Jerusalem, however, text opens up into a full and layered topography of the city which nonetheless remains largely structured around biblical sites—a feature that blurs the distinction between the topographical and the theological.⁷⁵ According to Glenn Bowman,

In the *Bordeaux Pilgrim's* narrative the order of events is not organized with reference to the moment of observation but in terms either of a spatial contiguity that collapses temporality, or... in terms of an eschatological periodicity that renders the narrator's role extraneous. The... text, rather than portraying the center of an expanding [Christian] new world order, seems to manifest to its audience a space continuous to, but not continuous with, the secular world. The pilgrim who moves out of his or her native land and into that holy space seems simultaneously to 'lose' himself or herself, and to 'find' a way out of this life and into a world that takes its being from the events and prophecies of the Bible. The *Itinerarium* thus appears to map a passage between two distinct domains: the contemporary and fallen world of the Roman empire; and another world in which time is eschatological and leads toward the eternity of promised redemption.⁷⁶

⁷³ Johnson, 563, 567-73.

⁷⁴ Johnson, 564.

⁷⁵ See Glenn Bowman, "A Textual Landscape: The Mapping of a Holy Land in the Fourth-Century *Itinerarium* of the Bordeaux Pilgrim" in *Unfolding the Orient: Travellers in Egypt and the Near East*, ed. Paul and Janet Starkey (Reading, UK: Ithaca Press, 2001), 7-40.

⁷⁶ Bowman, 14-5.

Subsequent medieval pilgrimage guides would continue to follow this pattern by routinely incorporating liturgies, prayers, and the previous paths traversed by saints and other exemplars all while practically leading a pilgrim to her desired destination.

According to Peter M. Candler, in *Theology, Rhetoric, Manuduction, or Reading Scripture Together on the Path to God*, the construction and arrangement of such pilgrimage maps in comparison to modern maps implies “not only a different ordering of space, but a different orientation of the reader to the ‘known.’ In other words, [they suggest] a mode of reading which is less comprehension of a tableau than the performance of a sequence of movements.”⁷⁷ It is this performance of a sequence of movements that ties the *itinerarium* as pilgrimage-map to the *itinerarium* as theological guidebook. The tactic of weaving together material topographies, prayers, liturgies, and scripture with an order of movement driven by desire for God secures a pattern of continuity between pilgrimages of the body and those of the soul.⁷⁸ The soul, however, remains an embodied intellectual faculty. Like the body of the pilgrim en route to Jerusalem, the soul’s ascent is tied to its ability to discern the proper orientation of signs—both signifying words and signifying bodies—in order to ascertain that end to which all signs ultimately point: the contemplation of the divine. Bonaventure was not alone among high medieval Christian writers in that he generally adopted an Augustinian understanding of signification as anchored in the action of desire for the divine Word. As this theory plays out in Augustine’s *Confessions*, such a view inscribed autobiographical narrative with the authorizing narrative of divine authorship, a life

⁷⁷ Candler, 2. In making this claim and throughout his book, Candler is informed by Michel de Certeau’s work in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Stephen Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984). The book performs an intervention in tendencies to read theological texts as containers of knowledge by re-reading several important medieval texts, including Augustine’s *Confessions*, the *Glossa Ordinaria*, and Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae*, with attention to their features as *itineraria*.

⁷⁸ Throughout this discussion, I use “soul” interchangeably with “mind” to recall the valences of the Medieval Latin word, *mens*.

whose path attains meaning through its participation in the larger narrative of Christ.⁷⁹ As it plays out in Bonaventure's *Itinerarium*, the pilgrim's journey to Jerusalem—the sacred site of the crucifixion—becomes the soul's journey to the Crucified. And just as the divine Word is articulated in Trinitarian order, the soul's return to the divine Word follows a Trinitarian dyadic structure overlaid atop the six days of creation and the six wings of the Seraph to arrive at the day of rest: simultaneously the journey itself, the image of the Seraph in its majestic entirety, overlaid atop the image of the Crucified body that simultaneously anchors signification and surpasses it. The journey to and through this image, however, remains a journey through the creation itself. Observe the titles of the seven chapters that comprise Bonaventure's *Itinerarium*:

- One: On the Stages of the Ascent into God and on Contemplating Him Through His Vestiges in the Universe
- Two: On Contemplating God In His Vestiges in the Sense World
- Three: On Contemplating God in His Image Stamped upon our Natural Powers
- Four: On Contemplating God in His Image Reformed by the Gifts of Grace
- Five: On Contemplating the Divine Unity through Its Primary Name Which Is Being
- Six: On Contemplating the Most Blessed Trinity in Its Name Which is Good
- Seven: On Spiritual and Mystical Ecstasy in Which Rest is Given to Our Intellect When through Ecstasy Our Affection Passes Over Entirely Into God⁸⁰

The *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* is thus driven by a desire, much like Gregory of Nyssa's account of Moses' final theophany, that is both a movement and a standing still. Signs do not explain or decipher the natural world, but inhabit and guide the natural world. At the level of sense, God may be contemplated both by means of and in nature; at the level of intellect, God's image is both constitutive of and actively reshape the powers of the soul; and at the level of the divine itself, God both exists *as* being and drives toward the good. The intellect, finally, achieves rest only when it achieves the ecstasy that is eternally pushed beyond itself—into what can only be signified by a divine death—into the

⁷⁹ For some an excellent essay on this topic of signification, autobiography and narrative, see Louis Mackey, "From Autobiography to Theology: Augustine's *Confessiones*" in *Peregrinations of the Word* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

⁸⁰ Bonaventure, 58.

superimposition of the seraph with the Crucified. The end of the Bonaventure's journey of the soul, then, assumes both the path of the life of Christ, culminating at the cross, and the path of the mind, which achieves ecstasy through and in—but not outside of—the maximal site of the death of the body. Death consummates not only the divine life but the divine affirmation of life embodied in Christ the Crucified. So Bonaventure concludes his text as follows:

Whoever loves this death can see God because it is true beyond doubt that one will not see me and live. Let us, then, die and enter this darkness; let us impose silence upon our cares, our desires and our imaginings. With Christ crucified let us pass out of this world to the Father so that when the Father is shown to us we may say with Philip: It is enough for us. Let us hear with Paul: My grace is sufficient for you. Let us rejoice with David saying: My flesh and my heart have grown faint; You are the God of my heart, and the God that is my portion forever. Blessed by the Lord forever and all the people will say: Let it be; let it be. Amen.⁸¹

As the journey reaches its end, signification and embodiment join in mutual affirmation as the voice of the itinerary performs the voices of Philip, Paul, and David across time and space in the doxology of both affirmation and creation: *Fiat, fiat, Amen*.

Bonaventure's text, as a work of theology, differs dramatically from any sort of *loci communes*. If one were to attempt to read it as a container for information, or as a temporally-arranged conceptual arguments, it would appear nearly unintelligible. If one resorted to reading the *Itinerarium* as "merely" symbolic or poetic, and thus requiring rational explication or demythologization, the text would likely appear antiquated. However, if we read the text as an *enchiridion*—a guide to one's discernment of the natural world and the nature of necessity through exercises of the mind—it might suddenly shed mutual light on puzzling features of Augustine's *enchiridion*, and thus on certain innovative features of Christian pedagogical writing. Like Augustine's text, Bonaventure's writing follows and interprets the world of sense through the lens of the tradition—in Bonaventure's case, the shapes of the Trinity, the seraph, and the crucifix. But even beyond what we saw with Augustine's handbook, Bonaventure not only

⁸¹ Bonaventure, 116.

welcomes but ritually performs the sensible relation between the structure of the human faculties and the (Trinitarian) structure of the divine life, as received through creedal teaching and scripture. By refiguring the entire handbook as an itinerary, Bonaventure presents a structure that—while related to the *enchiridion*—is better situated to the distinct spatial and temporal contours of Christian pedagogy.

Before looking at how Calvin's work may be read to follow such a pattern, let us pause to gather several tools provided by Candler to help modern readers approach premodern theological texts that function more as pilgrimage guides than as *loci communes*.⁸² First, Candler provides four concepts which are central to grasping the rhetorical aims of theological *itineraria*: 1) *ductus*, or "route"; 2) *scopus*, or "aim, target"; 3) *manuductio*, which refers to guidance—the etymology suggests being led on a "route" by "hand"); and 4) *traditio*, which refers to manuduction across time.⁸³ These terms draw out four tactics through which writing enacts guidance toward a particular end. These features are likewise visible in premodern cartographical *itineraria* of the sort discussed above. For the *Bourdeaux Pilgrim*, the *scopus* is the city of Jerusalem, and the individual movements are the *ductus*. The writing itself is *manuductio*, while scripture fills out *traditio*. In Bonaventure's case, the image of the seraph—a form of the beatific vision, as it is equally a vision of the Crucified—point to both the steps of the journey and the end goal of the journey. Bonaventure leads readers to the *scopus* in concert with the *traditio* of scripture, teachings concerning the Trinity, and the layered *manuductio* of St. Francis who himself was led along the path by St. Anthony.⁸⁴ For a number of patristic and medieval works of theology—including Augustine's *Enchiridion* and Bonaventure's *Itinerarium*—the *scopus* leads to some form of the beatific vision, although how exactly this vision is presented significantly affects the theological import

⁸² Candler argues that a great number of theological texts prior to the 15th century invention of the printing press are best read as *itineraria*.

⁸³ Candler, 7.

⁸⁴ See Bonaventure, 215, 313.

of the text itself, as we will see with Calvin.⁸⁵ The trope of concluding with the vision, however, is so common that if we were using “genre” in its more modern technical sense, the consummation with the beatific vision would easily provide a defining feature of this genre. Furthermore, it should be noted that *itineraria* of the soul share with *itineraria* of the pilgrimage the textual feature that the goal of the text is simultaneously the goal of the bodily journey. The text is not truly “read”—not fully grasped—until it is performed.

The question of how we can learn to read a text in this way leads to another useful set of concepts provided by Candler: the “grammar of participation,” which marks *itineraria*, versus the “grammar of representation,” which signals a general modern assumption concerning the nature of language and thus obscures the performative function of the *itineraria*. Candler defines the “grammar of participation” as follows:

[Grammar of participation] seeks, through its peculiar arrangement of textual material, to communicate, that is, to “bring into common,” by drawing the reader into a prior community of interpretation and by attempting to lead the reader to a goal which is both textual and ontological. For this reason... the common practice of concluding a theological writing in the Middle Ages with a discussion of the beatific vision is not a result of simple logical order, but of a cosmological order which situates the immediate vision of God at the end because it is the ultimate goal of all knowing, and the reader, it is hoped, by persuasion and pursuit will come to share in it herself.⁸⁶

Furthermore, participation draws one into the concrete practices of the ecclesial body. According to Candler,

To participate in the body of Christ as a pupil, or as a ‘reader,’ is thus to become part of a kind of pilgrim city whose origin and destiny is transcendent. One’s allegiance to this body, effected by the sacramental rite of initiation in baptismal confession and sustained by the unceasing

⁸⁵ Candler, 44.

⁸⁶ Candler, 34-35.

production of the church in the Eucharist, cannot be divorced from the training in theological teaching, whether as a student or a teacher.⁸⁷

“Representation,” on the other hand,

assumes a neutral and unequivocal register across which descriptions can be ferried from a code or tableau of knowledge to the mind, regardless of either the temporal identity of the mind or the temporality of texts themselves, which print is supposed to have overcome.

Representation, then, is a matter of immediate apprehension by virtue of an exterior sign, and is removed from the variables of time and human communities. As such, representation is the fundamental philosophical and theology strategy of modernity.⁸⁸

As with any typological binary, this distinction should not be given more weight than it can bear, and one may well take issue both with the misleading simplicity of the binary and with Candler’s choices concerning periodization.⁸⁹ However, this distinction between participation and representation does helpfully alert readers to avoid a habit of reading that simply assumes the aim of theological writing to merely be argumentative representation. We must therefore resist the temptation to treat Calvin’s text in an anachronistically “modern” fashion, as a mere container of a logical order, and instead attempt to read it as a text which shares the profound influence of the theory of signs that follows Augustine’s *De Doctrina Christiana*—anticipating language and writing as central to a participatory practice of reshaping of Christian selves.⁹⁰ While many features of Calvin’s text distinguish it from earlier texts such as Bonaventure’s, these differences are interesting precisely because of the common aims of theological

⁸⁷ Candler, 61.

⁸⁸ Candler, 34.

⁸⁹ See Candler, 9-17, 71-9. Candler attempts to hinge an epochal shift, discernible in shifts in reading practices and the use of texts, on certain features associated with the late-fifteenth and early-sixteenth century. These include the development of moveable-type printing in Europe and the reformers’ supposed commitment to *sola scriptura*. This obscures the extent to which the early modern period itself was structured by conflicting views and commitments, not least visible in the reformers’ view of scripture. The aim of my work is in part to highlight the extent to which Calvin’s writing manifests this kind of ambivalence, which includes some strong areas of commitment to the kinds of premodern approaches to scripture and reading which Candler so ably outlines.

⁹⁰ *De Doctrina Christiana* provided the dominant backdrop for medieval Christian understanding of reading and writing. I will return to a more detailed discussion of this work and its relation to Calvin’s theory of sacramental signification in the next chapter.

writing, largely influenced by Augustine, which persisted in shaping the backdrop of 16th century theology.⁹¹ In other words, the difference we see will be interesting precisely because they begin to signal different assumptions not necessarily concerning the aim of theological writing, but rather concerning the nature of the world and its relationship to God. In the final pages of this chapter, I will look at certain features in Calvin's writing, theological argumentation, and in the structure of the text itself which are suggestive of an *itinerarium* and then ascertain how this particular textual body accomplishes Christian formation through various tactics toward a particular end.

b. Calvin's Institutes

Let us begin by establishing the sense in which text of the *Institutes* signals a grammar of participation.⁹² We have already seen that the *Institutes* can persuasively be understood to operate in

⁹¹ This is, in many ways, the weakest part of Candler's argument. Texts from at least the 11th century begin to share characteristics of modern texts in terms of assumptions about the relation between sign and signified, text and life, and timeless conceptual clarity. Moreover, as authors from Pascal and Kierkegaard to Nietzsche show, grammars of participation hardly die out in modernity. However, Candler is surely correct in positing a general shift, such that contemporary students approaching philosophy or theology for the first time will rarely approach a text *assuming* anything like a grammar of participation. My argument, however, utilizes the distinction Candler pinpoints to argue that a grammar of participation makes sense even for early Reformation texts even as it helps us to chart the steps of this gradual shift which modernity brings in terms of reading and interpretation.

⁹² This term, along with its distinction from a "grammar of representation," is from Peter M. Candler Jr.'s *Theology, Rhetoric, Manuduction: Or Reading Scripture Together on the Path to God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006). I discuss Candler's theoretical contribution earlier in chapter three. For the purposes of this excerpt, I will note here that Candler defines the "grammar of participation" as follows:

[Grammar of participation] seeks, through its peculiar arrangement of textual material, to communicate, that is, to "bring into common," by drawing the reader into a prior community of interpretation and by attempting to lead the reader to a goal which is both textual and ontological. For this reason... the common practice of concluding a theological writing in the Middle Ages with a discussion of the beatific vision is not a result of simple logical order, but of a cosmological order which situates the immediate vision of God at the end because it is the ultimate goal of all knowing, and the reader, it is hoped, by persuasion and pursuit will come to share in it herself (34-35).

"Representation," on the other hand,

assumes a neutral and unequivocal register across which descriptions can be ferried from a code or tableau of knowledge to the mind, regardless of either the temporal identity of the mind or the temporality of texts themselves, which print is supposed to have overcome. Representation, then, is a matter of immediate apprehension by virtue of an exterior sign, and is removed from the variables of

some respects as an *enchiridion*, a text aimed at guiding the reader toward remembering the original relation between things that have become incongruous—the knowledge of God and ourselves [*cognitio Dei et nostri*], the sense of divine glory in and among nature [*sensus divinitatis*]. To ask the further question of whether the *Institutes* also operates as an *itinerarium* is to ask how it performs this guiding task by inviting readers to particulate in a particular sequence of movements toward a particular destination. One place to look for these features is the text’s macro-structure. This question therefore brings us back to the place where we began in this chapter—with the question of why Calvin so emphasized the importance of the *Institutes*’ final arrangement.⁹³

I have already noted that Calvin’s method of revising his own work was characteristically eclectic and inclusive from the outset. He rarely revised his own work by removing content. The original 1536 edition—Calvin’s “*breve enchiridion*,” structured around the Decalogue, the Lord’s Prayer, and the sacraments—remains almost entirely present within the much-expanded 1559 edition.⁹⁴ As the text expanded, however, Calvin began experimenting with more cohesive narrative structures, or the most appropriate *ordo recto docendi* (right order of teaching). The series of revisions begun in 1539 signal Calvin’s turn away from a simpler catechetical manual and towards a larger theological project aimed at accompanying or guiding the reading of scripture. And, with this shift, Calvin’s writing first began to

time and human communities. As such, representation is the fundamental philosophical and theology strategy of modernity (34).

While I find this distinction to offer considerable interpretive insight, I do not find Candler’s own use of it to be completely persuasive, particularly when he treats it as a historically-visible binary hinging on the sixteenth century. Candler is surely right that a general shift did occur over a period of centuries, such that contemporary students approaching philosophy or theology for the first time will rarely approach a text *assuming* anything like a grammar of participation. My reading of Calvin, however, suggests that Candler’s grammar of participation is visible even for early Reformation texts and perhaps even later.

⁹³ As earlier parts of chapter three discuss in greater detail, Calvin’s last preface contains the following claim: “Although I did not regret the labor spent, I was never satisfied until the work had been arranged in the order now set forth” (*Institutes*, “John Calvin to the Reader,” 3).

⁹⁴ My synopsis of Calvin’s various editions is indebted to Muller’s work in chapters six and seven of Richard A. Muller’s *The Unaccommodated Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012).

visibly follow the rhetorical pattern of Paul's letter to the Romans: beginning with discussions of creation and fall, proceeding through law and gospel, and culminating with the church, its sacraments, and civic life.⁹⁵ Calvin's revisions of the 1540s, however, would see him turn to the Apostles' Creed to supply an even larger edifice atop the still-present Pauline and catechetical orders. The ultimate innovation of the 1559 edition would be to make the Creedal structure explicit for the first time by dividing the *Institutes* into four discrete books. They are named as follows:

- I. Of the Knowledge of God the Creator [*De cognitione Dei creatoris*]
- II. Of the Knowledge of God the Redeemer in Christ, first disclosed to the fathers under the law, and then to us in the gospel [*De cognitione Dei redemptoris in Christo, quae Patribus sub Lege primùm, deinde & nobis in Euangelio patefacta est*]
- III. The mode of obtaining the grace of Christ, the benefits it confers, and the effects stemming from it [*De modo percipiende Christi gratiae, & qui inde fructus nobis proveniant, & qui effectus consequuntur*]
- IV. Of the external means or helps by which God allures us into fellowship with Christ, and keeps us in it [*De externis Mediis vel adminiculis, quibus Deus in Christi societatem nos invitat, & in ea retinet*]

From these titles alone, two now-familiar Calvinian themes are apparent. First, Calvin's theological and epistemological commitment to the proper relation of "knowledge" to "use" and "benefit" is headlined in these titles, situating *cognition* alongside such terms as *percipio*, *fruor*, *efficio* and *invitio*.⁹⁶ Second, although the first book famously begins with an inquiry into the relation between knowledge of God and knowledge of ourselves [*cognitio Dei et nostri*],⁹⁷ it is now evident that the work as a whole is concerned with relation and integrating these two things. It begins with the knowledge of God, focuses in on the more particular knowledge of God as the human-divine Christ, proceeds to the individual reader's inner

⁹⁵ See Muller, 124-30. Muller compellingly argues that this shift is the fruit of Calvin's encounter with Melancthon, who had structured his own 1521 *Loci Communes* soteriologically following Paul's example.

⁹⁶ In the next chapter, I will further explore these features of Calvin's pedagogy in their relation to Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*.

⁹⁷ It is interesting to note that the Latin which has at times been translated by Battles, McNeill, and others as knowledge of "self" is actually *nostri*, the genitive plural of *ego*. There is little suggestion, then, that Calvin's striking interest in the "knowledge of self" should be taken to signal some proto-modern approach to an autonomous or unitary self. Instead, Calvin's understanding of the self seems to always presume that "the self" is constituted through a series of relations, not only with others but fundamentally with God.

relation to the work and being of Christ, and then draws back out to the larger worldly stage in which the relationships between selves and Christ are enacted *in societate*.

This structure is therefore expressly concerned with mapping a path through which knowledge can be perceived, applied, and effected at a deliberate pace rather than merely represented in abstraction. In the trajectory of Calvin's argument as it spirals through the four books, readers are not simply presented with arguments that seek to unpack the conceptual content of the Creed.⁹⁸ Rather, Calvin's mode of argumentation actively attempts to disorient and then reorient the self such that it becomes disposed to perceive and enjoy the knowledge of God as the presence of God's glory and activity in the material contexts of life across various relational spheres: nature (book one), human being enacted in Christ (book two), human being integrated with Christ (book three), and the world structured by sacramental and social practices (book four). In fact, the arc of this *ordo recto docendi* resists the very terms that structure the grammar of representation. A style of argumentation addressing a knower whose intellectual, affective and bodily faculties require reorientation through the corrective artifice of scriptural and traditional teachings by definition *cannot* rely on the kind of knower assumed by the grammar of representation; it cannot hope to merely inform a capable knower.⁹⁹ Calvin's insistence on the fundamental relationship between the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves [*cognitio Dei et nostri*] fundamentally assumes a kind of "knower" who cannot simply grasp the known, but must *become* the known who is known by and through others. The self who begins the journey, who desires

⁹⁸ In fact, readers have repeatedly noted that this structure is, at best, an imperfect mirror of the Creed. Not only does the text contain many topics which are extraneous to those named within the Creed, but there are also clear macro-structural differences which Calvin could have avoided had he chosen to do so. Book III, for example, concludes with the last judgment and life everlasting while Book IV returns to the topic of the Church and sacraments, but concludes with a discussion of civil government. These anomalies suggest that Calvin is more concerned with guiding a reader toward achieving a certain relation to knowledge than with isolating and explicating the conceptual integrity of the Creed.

⁹⁹ To reiterate Candler's apt phrasing, Calvin's final four-book arrangement explicitly relies on constructing a "different relation of the knower to the known" (Candler, 2).

to know God and self, must precisely put her own self at risk as she learns to perceive and enact the knowledge of the divine in the world.

To read the *Institutes* merely as a set of *loci communes* and *disputationes* aimed at preparing a student to read scripture not only fails to address the overarching pedagogical aims that drive Calvin to keep re-ordering and re-shaping the text until achieving satisfaction with the final arrangement. It also under-reads a crucial phrase which has already been highlighted in Calvin's 1559 preface—a phrase containing the now-familiar and important word, *scopus*: “For I believe I have so embraced the sum of religion in all its parts, and have arranged in such an order, that if anyone rightly grasps it, it will not be difficult for him to determine what he ought especially to seek in Scripture, and to what end [*scopum*] he ought to relate its contents.”¹⁰⁰ It is no doubt correct to read the *Institutes*' purpose, within Calvin's larger corpus, as the preparation of candidates in sacred theology for the proper reading of scripture. As we saw in our study of the *enchiridion*, the pedagogical function of Calvin's text is distinctive from classical instances of the genre in that it always functions not on its own, but with respect to the primary handbook written by God. Not surprisingly, the same imitative relationship holds true for the sense in which the text is an *itinerarium*. Insofar as the *Institutes* functions as a roadmap, it resolutely defers to scripture as the primary roadmap. However, to stop at this observation would be to miss what Calvin sees as the *raison d'être* of both texts¹⁰¹—namely, that the reader can learn to read scripture not as an end in itself, but in order to better read the world and its relation to God and the self.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ *Institutes*, p. 4-5.

¹⁰¹ It is worth noting that interpreters have for centuries been notoriously at odds concerning the systematic center or unifying theme of the *Institutes*. Some have simply concluded that the *Institutes* is a disorderly text, structured by no single, discernible logic (Bouwsmma). Others, such as Muller, answer these critics by arguing that modern dissatisfaction with the *Institutes* has more to do with modern readers' failure to appreciate Calvin's particular 16th century aim, which was simply to provide doctrinal discussions to accompany his scriptural commentaries. Still others have maintained that a doctrinal theme, such as the twofold knowledge of God, is indeed able to make sense of the text as a whole (Dowey). It has become more common in recent years, however, for interpreters to locate a practical rather than doctrinal center, arguing that the *Institutes* aims to form

In order to better grasp how Calvin frames this complex relation of texts and life as an ongoing and progressive practice, let us look at several passages where Calvin evokes the characteristic features of an *itinerarium* to frame the use and purpose of scripture. Readers who are more familiar with later didactic genres of Reformed theology¹⁰³ are often surprised to encounter the vivacity of Calvin's writing for the first time. The *Institutes* is colloquially, colorfully, and sometimes polemically written, with arguments that eschew syllogisms in favor of classical forms of rhetoric, hyperbole, imagery and metaphor geared not only at rational but also affective persuasion.¹⁰⁴ Calvin explicitly repudiates the facility of philosophical abstractions or rational "proofs" to achieve the desired end of cultivating piety with respect to the divine. This style itself signals the imitative relationship Calvin's own writing assumes in relation to his understanding of scriptural writing:

We ought to remember what I said a bit ago: credibility of doctrine is not established until we are persuaded beyond doubt that God is its Author. The highest proof of Scripture derives in general from the fact that God in person speaks in it. The prophets and apostles do not boast of their keenness or of anything that obtains credit for them as they speak; nor do they dwell upon rational proofs.... We seek no proofs, no marks of genuineness upon which our judgment may lean; but we subject our judgment and wit to it as to a thing far beyond any guesswork!.... By

affections rather than to build a system (Gerrish, Boulton, and to some extent Jones). I want to argue that reading the text as an *itinerarium* contributes to this discussion by accounting not only for what the text contains, but for ways in which the text gives itself to be read. For the aforementioned books on Calvin, see the following: Matthew Myer Boulton, *Life in God: John Calvin, Practical Formation, and the Future of Protestant Theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011; William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Edward A. Dowey, Jr., *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952); Serene Jones, *Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1995); B.A. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1973); and Muller's aforementioned *The Unaccommodated Calvin*.

¹⁰² We will begin to see in the next chapter that this seemingly theological interest in the relation of God, self, and world contributes to the formation of the self in an array of spheres, including citizenship.

¹⁰³ Nineteenth- and twentieth-century Protestant systematics, following more closely after the style of Zwingli, Melancthon and Schleiermacher, are often typified by axiomatic arguments and neat conceptual presentation. Examples could include, but are far from limited to, the work of Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (London and Edinburgh, Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1872); Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1932); John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955); works by Thomas Torrance including *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2009).

¹⁰⁴ For the best analysis of Calvin's relation to and uses of classical and humanist forms of rhetoric, see Olivier Millet, *Calvin et la dynamique de la parole. Etude de rhétorique réformée* (Librairie Honoré Champion, 1992).

this power we are drawn and inflamed, knowingly and willingly, to obey him, yet also more vitally and effectively than by mere human willing or knowing!¹⁰⁵

The activity of reading is therefore elicited by the desire for God and aimed at the encounter with God prior to—and in excess of—any purely cognitive satisfaction.¹⁰⁶ In one sense, this suggestion that the design and goal of scripture is to lead a reader to beatific vision signals a clear marker of the *itinerarium*. It also indicates that Calvin understands the text to function primarily in a mediatory capacity rather than as a repository of argumentation, inviting the use of images, metaphors and evocations to serve as arguments in and of themselves, guiding the reader to better perceive the relationships between things. This is distantly resonant with the argumentative style of Bonaventure's *Itineraria*, in which the superimposed image of the Crucifix and the Seraph inaugurated, supported, and completed the journey.

Along similar lines, one striking image Calvin repeatedly uses to frame the layered path of Christian pedagogy and the proper use of the Word is that of the “labyrinth.” While this image immediately evokes a twisted path that requires the use of a guide, several of Calvin's interpreters have dubiously used Calvin's proclivity for this image as evidence for a certain pathological psychological disposition of the author.¹⁰⁷ However, as Muller and others have rightly pointed out,¹⁰⁸ a humanistically-trained reader would recognize Calvin's use of the labyrinth as an allusion to the classical myth which recounts Theseus' defeat of the Minotaur and founding of Athens. According to that story, Theseus set out on a journey to kill the Minotaur who had been devouring Athenian youth, as payment of tribute to King Minos of Crete—a goal which would require Theseus to navigate Daedalus' Labyrinth,

¹⁰⁵ *Institutes*, I.7.4.

¹⁰⁶ I will look more deeply at Calvin's view of the relationship between cognitive satisfaction and the larger aims of theological self-formation—namely, the pious enjoyment of God—in the next chapter.

¹⁰⁷ Several of Calvin's interpreters have turned to psychologizing in order to account for features of his theology. For one such attempt that focuses particularly on the labyrinth as evidence, see William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

¹⁰⁸ See Muller, chapter 4.

in which the beast dwelt. On his way, however, Theseus meets and falls in love with King Minos's daughter, Ariadne. As a token of her mutual love, she provides him a thread to find his way through the labyrinth. With the guidance of the thread in an otherwise un-navigable space, Theseus is able to successfully defeat the Minotaur and ultimately establish the city of Athens, along with its rules of law and custom.¹⁰⁹ With this mythic backdrop in mind, we can see that the labyrinth allusion is much more compelling not as a symbol of existential angst, but rather as a very particular form of disorientation that disrupts natural and civic life until it can be successfully traversed—a path requiring not only courage and desire, but a gift.

Calvin uses the image of the labyrinth at several crucial moments early in the *Institutes* to figure the terrain of the fallen mind and its uneasy relation to God. First, the labyrinth represents the relationship between the self and the structure of the mind:

For each human mind is like a labyrinth, so it is no wonder that individual nations were drawn aside into various falsehoods; and not only this—but individuals, almost, had their own gods. For as rashness and superficiality are joined to ignorance and darkness, scarcely a single person has ever been found who did not fashion for himself an idol or specter in place of God. Surely, just as waters boil up from a vast, full spring, so does an immense crowd of gods flow forth from the human mind, while each one, in wandering about with too much license, wrongly invents this or that about God himself.¹¹⁰

We have seen already that Calvin understands the effects of the fallen state quite literally as a distortion of sense faculties—and particularly the endowed sense of the divine [*sensus divinitatis*], through which we ought to be able to perceive the divine glory permeating nature. In this passage, we see the disjointed effects of sin elaborated with respect to the mind. Calvin employs a double image: not only the labyrinth to signal limitation and disorientation, but the floodwaters to signal the deluge of idols which compound human forgetfulness like a hall of mirrors. Due to the fallen state, which severs human

¹⁰⁹ For more detail around the myth of Theseus and its relation to the civic life of Athens, see Henry J. Walker, *Theseus and Athens* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

¹¹⁰ *Institutes*, 1.5.12.

cognition from the rectitude of its relation to the divine, the structure of the mind becomes not only un-navigable but also increasingly misleading. The pathological response to disorientation, after all, is the reflexive conjuring of spectral forms of security that only further engulf the seed of the divine. It is important to note that Calvin does not limit this tendency toward idolatry to the individual; he immediately depicts the labyrinth of the soul as the bane of civic life, replicating its labyrinthine shape at the level of the nation.¹¹¹

In a passage that follows shortly from the first, Calvin redeploys the image of the labyrinth to refer to the “divine countenance”—a thematic repetition of the knowledge of ourselves and its relation to the knowledge of God. Just as the human mind confounds one who pursues self-knowledge, the divine visage confounds one who pursues divine knowledge. The student, desiring the knowledge of both herself and the divine, thus finds herself immediately caught in the maze, confused about where she began and where she is going, radically alienated from any ability to clearly see either the operations of her own mind or the divine presence in the world. The use of the labyrinth as a trope thus structures the pursuit of knowledge of ourselves and God precisely as a journey—a dangerous, dark, and even impossible journey, unless one benefits from a guide. It is here, in his own mythic re-telling, that

¹¹¹ In addition to this civic valence, Calvin also uses the labyrinth to connect to Roman Catholic church teachings and practices which he finds to be extraneous, superstitious, or corrupt. For example, Calvin writes: “What is to be said of the present papacy? What likeness do they have between them? Here there is no preaching, no care for discipline, no zeal toward the churches, no spiritual activity—in short, nothing but the world. Yet this labyrinth is praised as if nothing better oared and disposed could be found” (4.7.22). Within this metaphor, then, we find a synopsis of the layers of Calvin’s project: nature, the self, the church, and ultimately civic life. In Muller’s words,

The labyrinth, the maze of problems, belongs to the troubled life of the church, particularly to the church of Rome—and the term appears in Calvin’s diatribe in the second section of his discussion of the ‘power of the church’ just prior to his discussion of the limitation of churchly power by the Word of God. We have seen the underlying point before: the Word of God is the only sure guide out of the labyrinth of human confusion (Muller, 85).

Calvin re-introduces his reader to the divine *Verbum*. This time, however, the Word does not merely clarify one's perception;¹¹² instead, it serves the function of a map:

Suppose we ponder how slippery is the fall of the human mind [*mentis lapsis*] into forgetfulness of God [*in Dei oblivionem*], how great the tendency to every kind of error, how great the lust to fashion new and artificial religions. Then we may perceive how necessary was such a written proof [*consignatio*] of the heavenly doctrine, that it should neither perish through forgetfulness [*oblivione*] nor be corrupted by the audacity of men. It is therefore clear that God has provided the assistance of the Word [*subsidium verbi adhibuisse*] for the sake of all those to whom he has been pleased to give useful instruction [*erudire*] because he foresaw that his likeness [*effigie*] imprinted upon the most beautiful form of the universe [*pulcherrima mundi forma*] would be insufficiently effective. Hence, we must strive onward by this straight path if we seriously aspire to the pure contemplation of God [*syncera Dei contemplationem*]. We must come, I say, to the Word, where God is truly and vividly described to us from his works, while these very works are appraised not by our depraved [*pravitate*] judgment but by the rule of eternal truth. If we turn aside from the Word, as I have just now said, though we may strive with strenuous haste, yet, since we have got off the track, we shall never reach the goal [*ad metam*]. For we should so reason that the splendor of the divine countenance [*vultus*], which even the apostle calls 'unapproachable,' is for us like an inexplicable labyrinth unless we are conducted into it by the thread of the Word; so that it is better to limp along this path than to dash with all speed outside it.¹¹³

Several important features of Calvin's overarching method are foregrounded in this passage. First, we see the recurrence of the subtle association between forgetfulness and watery engulfment through Calvin's use of the word *oblivio*. Like the labyrinth, this term carries an array of mythical resonances for a classically-trained reader, even as it simultaneously signals continuity with patristic and medieval Christian thinking—not least in Augustine's work—that constructs the theological task as one of

¹¹² See above where this metaphor is discussed in relation to the *enchiridion*. The key passage reads as follows:

Just as old or bleary-eyed men and those with weak vision, if you thrust before them a most beautiful volume, even if they recognize it to be some sort of writing, yet can scarcely construe two words, but with the aid of spectacles will begin to read distinctly; so Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God. This, therefore, is a special gift, where God, to instruct the church, not merely uses mute teachers but also opens his own most hallowed lips (*Institutes*, 1.6.1).

¹¹³ *Institutes*, 1.6.3.

memory.¹¹⁴ Of the multiple words available in Latin for forgetfulness, Calvin's choice is the one that retains the watery connotations still present in its English cognate. This association traces back to the Greek word for forgetfulness, *lethe*, which is also the mythic name for the river in Hades that bestows forgetfulness on those who bathe in it.¹¹⁵ Just as waves wash over sand, the depths of oblivion pose a threat to the divine imprint on creation—a threat counteracted only by the force of the repeated re-inscription of the written word, which Calvin refers to as a "*consignatio*": a promissory seal that unites two parties in an ongoing contractual relationship. This is an early but clearly-recognizable gesture to what we will soon see becomes Calvin's more robust theory of the sacramental signification that constitutes the covenant of adoption later in the text.¹¹⁶

Here, in its nascent form, the relationship between memory, forgetfulness, the Word, and the many references to the path already bears the marks of a grammar of participation. That is, Calvin does not figure the exercise of reading scripture as accessing a database of information, but rather as an ongoing and progressive journey guiding mind, body, and soul to a particular place where God's likeness is again visible. We see him employ a number of words and phrases that confirm that the text is given to lead and guide a person's sequence of movements across terrain: "assistance," "strive onward," "straight path," "aspire," "turn aside," "off the track," and "reach the goal." If these were not enough to recommend the *itineraria* as a lens through which to understand the formative dimensions of Calvin's theology of scripture, however, he concludes the passage with three unmistakable images: the labyrinth, the thread, and the end goal of divine contemplation. This clear allusion to the myth of

¹¹⁴ For more on this, see Paige E. Hochschild, *Memory in Augustine's Theological Anthropology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). The author discusses not only Augustine, but philosophical and theological uses of memory more widely.

¹¹⁵ For more on the relationships between *lethe*, *oblivion*, and the art or practice of forgetfulness in classical and Christian thought, see Marc Augé, *Oblivion*, trans. Marjolijn de Jager (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); Harold Weinrich, *Lethe: The Art and Critique of Forgetting*, trans. Steven Rendall (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).

¹¹⁶ This is our first glimpse of a topic which will occupy much of our attention later, especially in chapter five.

Theseus suggests at least three ways that, for Calvin, learning to read scripture is an enterprise that involves much more than “mere” reading. First, learning to approach and direct scripture is an activity akin to a journey which prioritizes the bodily act of feeling, negotiating the thread in the context of the labyrinth one step at a time; second, the viability of this journey’s attainment hinges on a relationship of love and desire—a response to the love that furnished the gift of the thread in the first place; and third, the outcome of this journey—the restoration of one’s ability to once again perceive the likeness of God imprinted in creation—is one that deeply implicates the order of civic life.

One further use of the labyrinth appears in book three, where Calvin is concerned with the means through which a Christian becomes integrated into the life of Christ. There, Calvin shifts the symbolic referents of the labyrinth and the thread yet again. The labyrinth now comes to refer to the nature of earthly life in general—the metaphor is, in a sense, materialized as the concrete path of embodied life marked by suffering and death. And, accordingly, the guiding thread likewise becomes incarnated as the embodied Word. Calvin writes:

Therefore, the apostle teaches that God has destined all his children to the end that they be conformed to Christ. Hence also in harsh and difficult conditions, regarded as adverse and evil, a great comfort comes to us: we share Christ’s sufferings in order that as he has passed from a labyrinth of all evils into heavenly glory, we may in like manner be led through various tribulations to the same glory. So Paul himself elsewhere states: when we come to know the sharing of his sufferings, we at the same time grasp the power of his resurrection; and when we become like him in death, we are thus made ready to share in his glorious resurrection.¹¹⁷

With the materialization of this metaphor, Calvin effectively completes the circuit between text and life, signification and matter that will come to define his theory of sacramental signification. The twisted path that figures and links the human mind with its fallen perception of the divine countenance is now located firmly within the immanent context of physical life itself. Material life *is* a labyrinth, marked by opacity, promising the possibility of sudden suffering and death at every turn. In this last instance,

¹¹⁷ *Institutes*, 3.8.1.

however, it is not merely the written itinerary which guides the believer through the labyrinth; it is the divine Word imprinted and resurrected in human flesh. The border between the text and the teacher has become blurred as we now find that materiality ultimately undergirds the possibility of the scriptural text that first gave a pilgrim to clearly glimpse its shape. The resignifying and clarifying Word, pedagogically guiding its reader through the maze, is no longer a mere text but a materialized movement, enacting the remembering and resignification of human life at every level—mentally, relationally, physically.¹¹⁸

With the shape of these relationships in view, it is now possible to see that the aim of the scriptural *itineraria* and the aim of the *Institutes* are superimposed. If the divine map leads the pilgrim step by step through the labyrinth toward the vision of the divine countenance, not only in human flesh, but imprinted on the universe, then the *Institutes* is a comprehensive and ordered study not only of how to approach scripture itself, but ultimately of the “end [*scopum*] he ought to relate its contents.”¹¹⁹ Moving the reader through her experience of the natural world (book one), of human being generally (book two), of the inner structure of the self as known in Christ (book three), and finally to the social and civic order of the world as known through the practices of the church (book four), the *Institutes* makes explicit that the end of theological training is not scripture itself, but its use in every sphere of life as a domain to be ritually related to God through practices of resignification. In other words, the original relation between the glory of God and the material world, dislocated due to the fallen distortion of the *sensus divinitatis*,¹²⁰ is finally re-sewn in book four through practices of Word and sacrament.

¹¹⁸ The precise sense in which the Word is “resignifying” will be discussed across the next two chapters, first in relation to Augustine’s theory of signs, and finally in relation to Calvin’s sacramental theology.

¹¹⁹ *Institutes*, 5.

¹²⁰ For more on this, see Paul Helm, “John Calvin, the *sensus divinitatis*, and the noetic effects of sin,” in *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 43 (1998): 87-107.

The specifics of Calvin's view of sacramental signification and how it relates to Calvin's natural theology in book one—and undergirds his doctrine of providence—will occupy our attention in chapter five. For now, however, we are left to relate the *Institutes* as an *itinerarium* to the variety of others which we have seen as examples of this kind of writing and finally assess Calvin's work in terms of its distinctiveness. Many common features have been pointed out already. As in other examples of the genre, Calvin's *itinerarium* acts to reshape a reader by guiding her (*manuductio*), in the company of a variety of sources and structures from the *traditio*,¹²¹ through a series of deliberate movements (*ductus*), to accurately perceive and negotiate signs in order to move toward a certain destination (*scopus*). However, the text also bears certain key distinctions with respect to Roman *itineraria*, medieval pilgrimage guides, and the exemplary model provided by Bonaventure's theological *Itinerarium*. There is, for one, the matter of its obvious length and relative disorganization in contrast to these other cases—a difference due in large part to its mimetic function as a guide to the similarly large and eclectic composition of scripture and prior commentary—a feature which nonetheless enhances its participatory quality.

But perhaps the most startling difference is found in the actual trajectory of the *ductus* and the ultimate location of *scopus* as it is literally presented in the text itself. Candler points out that medieval *itineraria*, whether aimed at leading a pilgrim to the actual city of Jerusalem or guiding a soul to the “spiritual Jerusalem” where God resides, were repeatedly figured as an ascent.

The trope of “steps” or “rungs” in a ladder is, of course, a favorite one among medieval theologians (an obvious example is John Climacus' *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*). It captures well the concept of rhetorical *ductus*, but particularly in terms of an ascent from things lower to things higher. Thus reading the account of the soul's itinerary necessarily makes of the reader a co-traveler along that very journey. Thus it is no “mere” metaphor Bonaventure employs when he describes the first six chapters of his work as “like the six steps of the true Solomon's throne,

¹²¹ I have already discussed the importance of the Decalogue, Lord's Prayer, Sacraments, Pauline soteriological *ordo docendi*, and the Creed as key components guiding the disposition of Calvin's 1559 text—not to mention the many deferrals to authority and disputations enacted therein.

by which we arrive at peace, where the true man of peace rests in a peaceful mind as in the interior Jerusalem.”¹²²

It would be a mistake to assume that these earlier texts, emphasizing the movement in terms of ascent, are necessarily implying a crude dichotomy of mind and body. Many times, the body is not discarded by the spiritual reading but rather lifted up and reinterpreted.¹²³ Nor should one be misled into assuming that the trope of ascent is a mere vestige of the influence of Neo-Platonism or Gnosticism on early Christian thought. According to Candler,

The role of ascent serves a specifically theological end in the literature of the monastic schools. It is a trope of monastic rhetoric and memory-training by means of which the reader is led onwards, through practice, to that ‘intellectual’ vision of God, or *theoria*.... The route to divine *theoria*, or beatific vision, is performed through the memory of Christ and his Church. The *Glossa Ordinaria*,¹²⁴ then, in its context within medieval mnemotechnical arts and monastic practice, emerges as not merely a “map” of the biblical story, but a route for the ascent of the soul to the vision of God.¹²⁵

In the examples we have considered—not only Bonaventure’s *Itinerarium* but even in Augustine’s *Enchiridion*—the shape of the text is explicitly framed as an ascent that not only points to the divine vision but also marks the end, or the consummation, of “theology,” or of *logoi* concerning God. The company of signs enables the journey, but signs also replicate alienation from the signified. The beatific vision at the end of a theological ascent is thus ordinarily signaled by the dissolution of words and signs, often appearing as a sudden string of images accompanied by negations. One might think, archetypally, of this well-known passage from the end of the Book of Revelation, appearing at the end of the entire scriptural canon:

¹²² Candler, 46.

¹²³ This is the case, for example, in Augustine’s *De Doctrina Christiana*, as we will soon see in more depth.

¹²⁴ The *Glossa Ordinaria*, which Candler treats in depth, was a collection of scriptural commentary appended to the scriptural text itself in the margins of the *Vulgata*. Martin Luther famously stripped the text of its glosses in order to re-present “bare” scripture to his students. See Candler, 74-5.

¹²⁵ Candler, 83.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.... I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it” (Revelation 21:4, 22-24, NRSV).

In certain respects, this passage shares typically apophatic features common to the negative theological tradition that was also deeply influenced by classical roots. Recall, for example, the famous negation of language surrounding Diotima’s “final vision” in Plato’s *Symposium*. I quote only a small fragment:

“First, this beauty always *is*, and doesn’t come into being or cease; it doesn’t increase or diminish...

when other things come to be or cease, it is not increased or decreased in any way nor does it undergo any change.”¹²⁶ Another similar example is found at the close of Pseudo-Dionysius’ *Mystical Theology*:

“Again, as we climb higher, we say this. [The cause of all things] is not soul or mind, nor does it possess imagination, conviction, speech, or understanding.”¹²⁷

While Calvin consistently gestures throughout the *Institutes* to the vision of the divine as the goal of Christian teaching guided by scripture,¹²⁸ it is startling to notice the near complete absence of either ascent or negation, particularly as Calvin’s text draws to a close. Where a reader familiar with Christian writing prior to the sixteenth century might be prepared for Calvin’s prose to lead to a metaphorical Jerusalem, apophatic negations, or some kind of imagery or poetry pointing to the eternally un-nameable—or at *least* replicate the creedal ending of “life everlasting”¹²⁹—Calvin may finally lead his reader more legibly in the direction of Epictetus or Cicero, or perhaps even of Theseus.

¹²⁶ Plato, *Symposium*, 211a.

¹²⁷ Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology* in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 141.

¹²⁸ See, for example, *Institutes* 1.1.2, 1.6.3., 1.11.3, 1.15.4, 2.7.8., 2.9.1., 3.11.23.

¹²⁹ This appears not at the end of the text, but at the end of Book III, showing at least that Calvin did not see himself strictly beholden to the creedal pattern.

The last pages of the *Institutes* find the reader firmly returned to the midst of earthly life, this time faced with the most human of worldly concerns: negotiating the laws and customs of civic life—the proper domain, classically speaking, of *institutio*, *religio*, and *pietas*. The pattern should now be familiar. First, Calvin frames the endowed goodness of human institutions and authority, ordained by the divine will and manifesting the divine glory:

We owe this attitude of reverence and therefore of piety toward all our rulers in the highest degree, whatever they may be like. I therefore the more often repeat this: that we should learn not to examine the men themselves, but take it as enough that they bear, by the Lord's will, a character upon which he has imprinted and engraved an inviolable majesty.¹³⁰

Second, due to the effects of sin that drive a wedge between human action and divine participation, Calvin gestures toward a pious practice of discerning and reinstituting that basic relation. One touchstone of this practice involves assessing rulers according to the standard of living benefit:

For if there are now any magistrates of the people, appointed to restrain the willfulness of kings, I am so far from forbidding them to withstand, in accordance with their duty, the fierce licentiousness of kings, that, if they wink at kings who violent fall upon and assault the lowly common folk, I declare that their dissimulation involves nefarious perfidy, because they dishonestly betray the freedom of the people, of which they know that they have been appointed protectors by God's ordinance.¹³¹

And finally, Calvin asserts that kings achieve legitimacy only in accordance with the divine *Verbum*:

If [kings] command anything against [the Lord], let it go unesteemed. And here let us not be concerned about all that dignity which the magistrates possess, for no harm is done to it when it is humbled before that singular and truly supreme power of God.... I know with what great and present peril this constancy is menaced.... But since this edict has been proclaimed by the heavenly herald, Peter—"We must obey God rather than men"—let us comfort ourselves with the thought that we are rendering that obedience which the Lord requires when we suffer anything rather than turn aside from piety. And that our courage may not grow faint, Paul pricks us with another goad: That we have been redeemed by Christ at so great a price as our redemption cost him, so that we should not enslave ourselves to the wicked desires of men—much less by subject to their piety.

¹³⁰ *Institutes*, 4.20.29.

¹³¹ *Institutes*, 4.20.30.

So concludes the text: not with the image of the divine vision surrounded by negations of words, but with the vision of divine glory enacted through patterns of affirmation and resistance within the realm of civic life.

The reader is left in Geneva, an ordinary city; not the city of Jerusalem properly speaking or even in a spiritual sense. This civic space is never suggested to be anything other than thoroughly ordinary. It does not lift the self upward, but rather pushes the self outward into the generalized urgency of a present that could, properly speaking, be *any* given present. There is a sense in which Calvin's final scene echoes one aspect of the Book of Revelation which had been passed over by so many other traditional iterations of the Jerusalem trope. Specifically, in the *Institutes*' final scene, the heavenly city *comes down*. The "home of God," we read, "is among mortals." That which was from above has become superimposed with—and perhaps finally reinstates—that lost glorious creation melancholically depicted in the opening pages of both Calvin's text and the scriptural text. Now, "The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it." If there is a moment of negation, it is not one that signals a utterly new relationship; it is rather the ongoing practice of negating forms of human action that transgress the limit of the knowledge of ourselves that is given by the knowledge of God. It is a moment inscribed within a practice of living resignification that, in constantly perceiving, remembering, and navigating the order of the world through the lens of scripture—writing through learning, learning through writing—carries on in perpetuity. Rather than

¹³² *Institutes*, 4.20.31.

drawing materiality upward, it spreads divine signification outward, enacting the glory of God expansively by means of exploring the nature of God's *consignatio* with immanence.¹³³

It remains to examine the particular movements of this *consignatio*, the logic of sacramental signification that structures its ongoing negotiation, and finally its relation to Calvin's doctrine of providence. First, however, we must look more closely at how Calvin envisions his doctrinal arguments—those comprising the individual steps of the *itinerarium*—to perform the step-by-step work of preparing the self for the reformation of church and city.

¹³³ It is a question, at least at the end of this chapter, whether this enactment *is* the *visio Dei* or whether this so only insofar as this particular pedagogical text operates within the determined limits of immanent life.

Chapter 4

The Work of Doctrine: Christian Teaching in Calvin's *Institutes*

If the last chapter's pursuit of the itinerant arc of the *Institutes* left us in the city—the immanent, generalized, substitutable order of civic life—this chapter begins to concern us with the formation of the citizen. Here, we move one step closer to Calvin's doctrine of providence. To grasp how Calvin's arguments on providence are working, however, it is important to bear in mind the larger aim of the *Institutes* to shape and guide the kind of subject who is equipped to live, receive, obey, and resist within the earthly sphere as a final, yet perpetual step toward enacting and participating in the glory of God in and among the creation. In order to ascertain the kind of Christian self who participates in what I have called the "practice of providence"¹ as it appears in Calvin's writing, we must ascertain the extent to which providence plays a role in a larger drama of citizenship, one in which the subject whose embodied citizenship in heaven becomes constitutive of the proper enactment of citizenship on earth. And to do this, we must start by looking at the way Calvin understands the basic operations of Christian teaching on the self. If the last chapter looked at the overarching contours of the text, this chapter narrows to look at how particular pieces work to guide readers from outset to conclusion.

As such, this chapter closely accompanies the next. Here, I look at Calvin's precise doctrinal method as he articulates it in the opening chapters of the *Institutes*; in the next chapter I examine how that method ties providence together with ecclesiology and ultimately with his teaching on civil authority. In this vein, I begin here by providing a general preview of where these next two chapters will lead us. Ultimately, I intend to show on the one hand that Calvin's doctrine of providence is distinguished from previous classical and Christian deployments of providence by cultivating an attitude

¹ See chapter two of this dissertation.

of affirmation toward the material circumstances and necessities of immanent life. This posture treats the apparently-independent intermediaries and instrumental causal complex of the world *as* one that is affirmed and inhabited by God, and thus creatively declared by divine *fiat* to be a good in itself. The complex relationship between God-as-governor and God-as-affirmer is clarified, as the *Institutes* proceeds, by Calvin's discussion of sacramental signification and by his particular understanding of the *consignatio*² sealed through the sacraments as one of "adoption."³ I will also show that this ethical posture toward materiality fundamentally undergirds the formation and activity of the Calvinian citizen, undergirding her participation not merely in the "true" church but also in the multiple, layered domains of immanence. Put another way: the person who learns to properly enact and participate in the economy of God's providence with regard to the natural world and the necessities of embodied life crucially undergirds the subject who is, for Calvin, both a full participant in the life of the church and, by virtue of that ultimate allegiance, a properly constituted participant in civic life.

Through the course of these next two chapters, we will see that the relationship between providence and civic order is organic to the shape of text itself. Not only do these topics appear symmetrically at the cusp of the first and last books of the *Institutes*, they also fundamentally concern the relationships that situate embodied human life between immanence and transcendence. The discourse on providence, especially in its Christian iterations, is a discourse that addresses human questions of suffering and incongruity with reference to the nature of transcendent power. As such, it fundamentally concerns the nature of divine governance, or the question of how divine power governs mundane occurrences. This not only integrates the distance between the divine and the mundane, it

² *Consignatio*, which we first encountered in the last chapter, is Latin for contract or covenant.

³ A good portion of Calvin's covenantal theology appears in book two, which will not be treated in depth here. My discussion of the importance of noting the covenant of adoption will appear alongside my discussion of sacramental signification in chapter five. Calvin's definition of the sacraments as signs or seals of the covenant will warrant additional discussion of Calvin's covenantal theology.

also provides a conceptual model for how governmentality works in general—one that cannot but impact the way would-be citizens conceive of their relation to political power. Calvin, however, precedes his brief conclusion on civil authority with a robust doctrine of the church and sacraments. In book four of the *Institutes*, we find sophisticated discussion of sacramental signification wedged between Calvin's more general discussions of the constitution, role, and disciplinary procedures of the church and his concluding discussion of Christian duties relating to civil society. The reader is thus left to ponder exactly how these distinct *loci* are designed to interrelate. Is the teaching on civil authority logically continuous with the teaching on church order and practice?⁴ In what way are natural governance and activity, ecclesial governance and activity, and civic governance and activity layered across the text? And what is the role of the human in relation to the divine at each particular site? The purpose of the current chapter is to lay the groundwork for a precise account of this interrelation.

One important way to get at this relation is to understand the interesting theoretical account Calvin provides in book four for sacramental semiotics. To prepare for that account, a good portion of this chapter is devoted to reading Augustine's theory of signs in *De Doctrina Christiana*, which I will argue undergirds much of Calvin's later thinking. Historically speaking, it is undeniable that Calvin's treatment of the Eucharist was largely shaped by the theological disputes that were already dividing movements of reform—particularly Lutherans, the Swiss cantons influenced by Zwingli, and the increasing collections of Anabaptists. In this context, Calvin's emphasis on the real but *spiritual*

⁴ One way of responding to this question would be to study the enacted relationship between church and state in Geneva during and after Calvin's time, giving attention to the public theological and humanistic rhetoric undergirding its operation. In what way did the arguments from Calvin's writing directly impact the institutional shape of the city? The concrete role played by Geneva in the development of Calvin's theology of the city—and vice versa—will largely remain at the margins of this project, although I return to it in the next two chapters. For some particularly interesting approaches to the political-religious legacy of Calvin's Geneva, see John Witte Jr. and Robert M. Kingdon, *Sex, Marriage, and Family in John Calvin's Geneva*, three vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans's, 2005); Pamela A. Mason, "The Communion of Citizens: Calvinist Themes in Rousseau's Theory of the State," *Polity* 26: 1 (Autumn, 1993): 25-49; and Philip S. Gorski, "Calvinism and State-Formation in Early Modern Europe," in *State/culture: State-formation After the Cultural Turn*, ed. George Steinmetz (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 147-81.

presence of Christ in the holy supper is often characterized as a “middle way” between Lutheran ubiquity and the Zwinglian ceremony of remembrance.⁵ However, a close reading of Calvin’s theory alongside Augustine’s suggests that Calvin strategically sought to reactivate the Augustinian approach to signs precisely as a theological response to the novel questions posed by the budding social, political, and scientific upheavals of the 16th century.⁶ Along these lines, Christopher Elwood’s *The Body Broken* stands among recent works of scholarship that assert an overt rather than merely implicit relationship between sacramental signification and political power. We will ultimately see that Calvin’s attempt to link the real spiritual presence of Christ among the embodied community in the Eucharistic rite with the physical *absence* of Christ’s singular body would hold subversive implications on the public perception of monarchical power in relation to the particular body of the king.⁷

First, however, it will be necessary to grasp how the mechanics of sacramental signification illumine and in many ways effectuate Calvin’s understanding of providence—or the basic relation between “God the creator,” the creation itself, and human beings as bare creatures. Calvin’s sacramental theology is, ultimately, a precisely enacted drama of presence and absence in which the physicality of Christ the Mediator not only accounts for the absence of Christ on earth, but establishes the possibility for the spiritual presence of Christ diffused among the physically embodied members of the community. I will argue that this choreography is visible in the mechanics of providence, crucially

⁵ For a study of the origin of the sixteenth century eucharistic debates, including but not limited to the impact of Luther and Zwingli, see Amy Nelson Burnett, *Karlstadt and the Origins of the Eucharistic Controversy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁶ Calvin’s appreciation for Augustine and his strategic use of the Augustinian tradition to critique more recent religious practices and theological commitments of the Roman church has been widely acknowledged (not least by Calvin himself). His doing so particularly in relation to his sacramental theology and ecclesiology is less acknowledged, however, likely in part because Calvin deviates from Augustine in several crucial ways which I will note throughout.

⁷ Elwood argues that the dissemination of Calvinist arguments concerning the mode of sacramental signification, which dissociated the physical presence of Christ from the Eucharist, functioned to undermine and reorder semiotics of power that undergirded the French monarchy. I will discuss this argument at greater length in the conclusion. See *The Body Broken* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

illuminating oft-ignored tensions at the heart of his complex articulation of this doctrine.⁸ Calvin's doctrine of providence often becomes characterized as one in which God actively determines all earthly events. However, within Calvin's view of providence, the freedom of God is emphasized not only in its abstractly determinative capacity, but even more strongly in the concrete actions that God has undertaken which serve to diffuse the divine presence among the complex array of intermediary causes.⁹ The general relationship between divine transcendence and worldly immanence in Calvin's *Institutes* as a whole should thus not be treated as a one-sided, purely determinative relation. Rather, the relation is anchored by a deliberate set of movements freely enacted by God but eliciting the responsive and repeated actions of human beings. The same is true in the Eucharist: first, God enacts the gesture of incarnation which is followed by the very absence of (but continued metaphysical reality of) Christ's material body; second, the making-present of God's spiritual reality through the adoption of diverse and active human bodies serves to secure the order of the material creation more generally.

⁸ For one helpful account of how tensions between the hiddenness of God and God *pro nobis* point to often-overlooked complexities in Calvin's doctrine of providence, see B.A. Gerrish's essay, "'To the Unknown God': Luther and Calvin on the Hiddenness of God," in *The Journal of Religion* 53: 3 (Jul., 1973): 263-92.

⁹ This argument points to a complex relationship between Calvin and late medieval nominalism. The rise of nominalism played an important role in shaping the intellectual tensions of the sixteenth century, although its influence on Luther and Calvin may have been exaggerated. For Calvin, it is clear that he is concerned to preserve certain characteristic features of the nominalist God, such as God's freedom; however, closer scrutiny suggests that some characteristic language associated with nominalism serves a rhetorical purpose in Calvin's writing to prepare the reader for the restoration of a more robust association between the divine and materiality. The recent turn to looking at the manifestation of God rather than merely proclamation in Calvin's theology, for example, suggests that one ought not to overlook the intended *effect* of the depictions of a God capable of the *decretum horribile*, or the role that such rhetoric plays within the scope of Calvin's overarching pedagogical purposes.

For recent works which take seriously the importance of materiality and visibility in Calvin's theology, see Barbara Pitkin, *What Pure Eyes Could See: Calvin's Doctrine of Faith in its Exegetical Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 1999; and Randall Zachman, *Image and Word in the Theology of John Calvin* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press), 2009. For some discussions of the role of nominalism in the sixteenth century and beyond, see Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 2008; Louis Dupré, *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); Heiko A. Oberman, *The Dawn of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992) and *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963); and Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983).

Stepping back, we can see that in many ways these are the movements that undergird the modern category of citizenship. Historically speaking, widespread anxiety around the political and social upheavals of the 16th century would not only enliven questions of belief and citizenship but would also undergird the need for differently-oriented theological responses to it. Writing on this topic in the work of another (albeit later) 16th century author, William Shakespeare, Julia Reinhard Lupton has described the modern character of the “citizen” as standing in a constructive contrast to the “saint,” who is characteristically committed to the transcendent and thus at odds with the mundane order. In the transition to modernity, according to Lupton, it would appear that

the saint is dead. Long live the citizen. If saint and citizen face each other across historical catastrophe, the term *citizen-saint* implies not only the opposition, but also the yoking of terms, an incomplete passage from one to the other that marks their once and future union as a site of bridging as well as division and separation. The citizen-saint is another centaur, a hybrid between sacred and secular forms of community and hence at home in neither. The phrase names the fissures in the secular conception of the citizen... [and] also designates and indeed calls forth a positive ethical potential in a retooled conception of both citizenship and religious fellowship that would exist beyond the limited fields of national and sectarian belonging that each has been used to defend.¹⁰

Moreover, she continues, the relationship long noted in the discourse of political theology¹¹ between the exceptional decision of the sovereign and the stability of the political order can also be read to inform the genesis of the character of the citizen, for whom the exceptionality of the incalculable, vulnerable body constitutes the need and ability to engage in society through the adoption, activation, or reorientation of shared norms.¹² It does so, however, in a process which, in many ways, reverses the

¹⁰ Julia Reinhard Lupton, *Citizen-Saints: Shakespeare and Political Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 4.

¹¹ See my introduction of political theology and its relevance to this project in chapter one.

¹² Lupton provides an interesting discussion of this in a chapter on the significance of the Apostle Paul’s negotiation of citizenship in the New Testament, and particularly the significance of the debate over circumcision within early Jewish-Christian communities. Circumcision (particularly when used as a passage for assimilation rather than a birth rite) in many ways prefigures the modern constitution of process of citizenship. It acknowledges both the desire and need to join the community while bearing the excessive and incalculable marks of bodily difference. Circumcision is therefore both the mark of inclusion that overcomes the exception while simultaneously signifying

order of the sovereign exception: “If the exception orients the foundational metaphors of political theology, the norm forms the baseline for civic discourse, pointing to procedure, process, and precedent and to equity, equality, and equivalence—opposites in every way to the sovereign exception.”¹³ As theoretical touchstones, notions of sovereign decision, normative order, and the relationship between the singular physical body and the general spiritual body will prove illuminative to the workings and potential effects of many of the theological arguments that I will consider across the next two chapters.

With that foreshadowing in mind, the priorities of the current chapter remain oriented around theological exposition. For now, I am concerned with how best to grasp the particular doctrinal arguments presented in this particular text. The previous chapter asserted the importance of reading doctrines in relation to the overall *scopus* of the text, or with attention to how the text as a whole functions toward the end of certain pedagogical goals. Once we allow that the text is neatly ordered to shape its readers according to certain deliberate ends, it also becomes important to consider how each doctrinal *locus*—each “site” along the itinerary, or each “chapter” of the handbook—contributes to this formation. This involves discerning not only the “horizontal” path of a theological work by giving attention to its starting point, path, and conclusion, but also studying what one might call the “vertical” pattern that structures each doctrinal discussion along that path.

that loss and its inability to be narrated, or fully accounted. Within the later Christian scheme largely established by Paul’s arguments, however, it is precisely the absence of circumcision through sublation which provides the symbolic structure that founds a more universal citizenship. If we see similar moves motivating many of Augustine’s concerns (one might think of his response to the Donatist controversy which hinges church membership in the absent God through the merely instrumental presence of the body of the priest only to exhort the believer toward enacting her baptism by seeking the unity of the church body) and Calvin’s concerns (we will see a similar pattern with his Eucharistic theology, situated self-consciously as a unifying “middle way” between Luther and Zwingli), the repetition may owe in part to the way certain theological patterns respond to periods of civil unrest and schism. However, one of the interesting facets of Calvin’s work in contrast to Augustine and Paul, as we will see, is the novel way nature and civil society are constructed within the theological arc.

¹³ Lupton, 6.

In the opening chapters of book one, Calvin provides a clear articulation of the order and effect of Christian teaching, parts of which we have already glimpsed. He discusses, for example, the relation of knowledge to use, use to benefit, and the crucial role of piety. My aim in this chapter is to more precisely examine the relation of these various categories through which candidates in sacred theology become reoriented cognitively, sensibly, affectively, and bodily through the sequential exercise of ordered Christian teaching. I have already suggested that attention to Augustine's theory of signs will shed light on Calvin's sacramental theology. Along these lines, Augustine's more general understanding of Christian teaching—framed similarly in relation to the interpretation of scripture—will illumine much more general commitments at the heart of Calvin's theological project. In this chapter, I will first perform an extended reading of Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana* which will not only set the stage for our later discussion of sacramental signification, but will also provide a backdrop against which we can better appreciate the way Calvin understands the work of Christian pedagogy more generally. We will see, in the second part of this chapter, that Calvin's language suggests a self-conscious re-inhabitation of the Augustinian pedagogical framework—albeit with certain clear and crucial differences. With these aims in hand, let us turn to Augustine.¹⁴

I. Augustine's theory of signification within the frame of Christian pedagogy

Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana* (DDC) presents itself as a hermeneutical manual, offering rules for interpreting the scriptures. As such, it can perhaps be read in a complementary relationship to Augustine's *Enchiridion*, the features of which we discussed in the previous chapter. Whereas the *Enchiridion* is a manual largely focused on the content and use of articles of faith for the purpose of

¹⁴ The previous chapter, in its discussion of the influence of the *enchiridion*, included a relatively detailed reading of Augustine's *Enchiridion*. Few would deny Augustine's influence on Calvin, but too often treatments of that influence focus on topics of grace and foreknowledge. This project, concerned as it is with the pedagogical strategies that shape the macro- and microscopic contours of the *Institutes* as a theological text, warrants a deeper investigation of the substantial influence of Augustine on matters of theological method, epistemology, habituation, and signification.

progressing in Christian love toward the *visio Dei*, DDC offers a more theoretical explication of how faith is able to achieve understanding through discerning and relating scriptural signs to their proper referents.¹⁵ The text thus opens by framing the problem of interpretation after the familiar fashion of a hermeneutical circle between parts and whole, which Augustine personifies by anticipating two different kinds of critics. One group, he writes, will critique his book thinking they have no need for rules, for they already possess the object itself. The other set will focus on the rules and become frustrated at Augustine when they find themselves failing to grasp the object.¹⁶ Already, the problematic is in place: how can a person understand how to apply the rules if she has no prior notion of the object to which they lead? But how can one know the object without first engaging the rules?¹⁷

As I have already suggested, spending some time with Augustine's response to this problem will help us to better understand the pedagogical aims that shape Calvin's doctrinal discussions in addition to providing important insight into Calvin's view of Eucharistic signification. There is a third reason, however, why pausing to look at the wider features of DDC will be of value to this inquiry: we will see that Augustine envisions—and in many ways assumes—a robust and prior role for practice, habituation, and material context in the exercise of performing and receiving Christian teaching. I will ultimately argue that Calvin's doctrinal method carries similar assumptions that have often been overlooked and that deeply affect the way we should understand the rhetorical—and indeed performative—aims of Calvin's doctrinal expositions. With these overall aims in mind, let us turn to the text.

¹⁵ My reading of Augustine's theory of signification has been guided by several helpful essays which treat the topic in much greater depth. For a fuller exposition than I am able to provide here, see Louis Mackey's essay, "Faith and Reason in Augustine's *De Magistro*" in *Peregrinations of the Word* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997); Mark D. Jordan, "Words and Word: Incarnation and Signification in Augustine's *De doctrina Christiana*," in *Augustinian Studies* 11 (1980): 177-196; and B. Darrell Jackson, "The Theory of Signs in St. Augustine's *De doctrina christiana*," in *Revue des études augustinienes* 15 (1969): 9-49.

¹⁶ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. Green (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). Citations will use the common Latin abbreviation *DDC*, followed the internal textual demarcations with preface or book number followed by paragraph number. *DDC*, P.6-ff.

¹⁷ See also Augustine's *De Magistro*.

This initial problematic between part and whole which drives the argument of DDC is a reiteration of what is sometimes called the “eristic paradox,” or the paradox of how one can come to know that which one does not already know. It plays a well-known and important role in Plato’s *Meno*. Its contours are also visible, however, in the Pauline argument of Romans 9-11—an argument that concerns Christian teaching in relation to the negotiation of civic, ethnic, and bodily difference:

For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!” But not all have obeyed the good news; for Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed our message?” So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ (Romans 10:12-17, NRSV).

In this Pauline iteration, the chain of interpretive links which would otherwise seem to circle viciously is secured in a Christian category with which we have already become familiar: the “word” of Christ, a phrase suggesting both incarnation and proclamation.¹⁸ For there to be a possibility of teaching and progressing toward the knowledge of God, a student must be able to strive not only for the right order of signs such that the signs may be usefully grasped; but she must also be able to trust in the fundamental relationship between those signs and the reality to which they point and through which they “mean.” Signs must not only reward efforts at discernment, but also invite and initiate participation.

Plato would resolve this tension through framing the guidance of the teacher against the backdrop of *logoi*, or arguments, concerning forms, reincarnation, and recollection.¹⁹ Augustine, however, picks up the thread of Paul’s argument and proceeds from the *theoria* of incarnation grasped

¹⁸ Early in chapter three, Calvin’s explicit reliance on the relation and distinction between scripture as the word of God and Christ as the *Dei Verbum*, in the tradition of the first chapter of John, was discussed at some length.

¹⁹ The *Meno* treats the topic of teaching. There, Socrates guides an uneducated slave toward the Pythagorean theorem to argue for theories of preexistence, reincarnation, and recollection as a response to the eristic paradox.

by the response of faith. At the outset, however, Augustine makes a crucial assertion: he insists that one cannot begin merely with the claim of the incarnation, but that one must rather start one's journey from signs to things within a pedagogically-fit material context. He writes,

Let us not tempt the one in whom we have placed our trust, or we may be deceived by the enemy's cunning and perversity and become unwilling even to go to church to hear and learn the gospel, or to read the Biblical text or listen to it being read and preached, preferring to... see the Lord Jesus Christ in person and hear the gospel from him rather than from humans. Let us beware of such arrogant and dangerous temptations, and rather reflect that the apostle Paul, no less, though cast to the ground and enlightened by a divine voice from heaven, was sent to a human being to receive the sacrament of baptism and be joined to the church. And Cornelius the centurion, although an angel announced to him that his prayers had been heard and his acts of charity remembered, was nevertheless put under the tuition of Peter not only to receive the sacrament but also to learn what should be the objects of his faith, hope, and love.²⁰

In the scriptural examples Augustine provides, we find an emergent pedagogical pattern involving successive repetitions of call and response. First, the sign goes out by way of a divine or angelic call to the individual, who in these cases responds with a gesture of faith that leads her to the larger community of the church. The church subsequently re-enacts the call and response through performing the sacrament of baptism. Prior to any understanding of the central mystery of the incarnation, then, we find a role for embodied intermediaries to inculcate the initiate into the activity of signification.

Augustine continues with the importance of human intermediaries:

It has been said "For God's temple is holy, and that temple you are": how could that be true if God did not make divine utterances from his human temple but broadcast direct from heaven or through angels the learning he wished to be passed on to humankind? Moreover, there would be no way for love, which ties people together in the bonds of unity, to make souls overflow and as it were intermingle with each other, if human beings learned nothing from other humans.²¹

In order to interpret, it is therefore a necessary prerequisite that one observe, receive, and imitate the Christian life with others in the community of the church in order to secure one part of the analogical

²⁰ DDC, P.12. Note, at the end, the reference to "faith, hope, and love" recalls the parallel structure of the Augustinian *Enchiridion's* more doctrinally-oriented strategy of teaching.

²¹ DDC, P.13-14.

relationship Augustine will go on to construct between things and signs, thoughts and words, and the consummate pedagogy of divine incarnation.

In book one, then, Augustine performs this relationship by placing himself in the middle, as one who has advanced by practice but remains an intermediary in the chain of gift and ascription: “Since in fact my hope of completing the work is based on God, from whom I already have much relevant material through meditation, I have no need to worry that he will fail to supply the remainder when I begin to share what has been given to me.”²² In the same vein, he proceeds to introduce the distinction between signs and things [*signa et res*] by employing this same mediatory rhetoric within the specific framework of teaching: “All teaching is teaching of either things or signs, but things are learned through signs.” Signs, he goes on to explain, are also things; but not all things are signs. Signs are *signs* insofar as they *signify*, or refer to some other thing.²³ Augustine thus establishes learning as the learning of relationships between signs and things. He then proceeds to relate this generalized theory of signs to the reality of a concrete hierarchy of signification through which the human being—its capacities and its desires—can proceed towards participation in its divine origin and end through the adjudication of signs.

This link between signs and reality is established as Augustine introduces his distinction between things to be used [*uti*] and things to be enjoyed [*frui*]:

[Things] which are to be enjoyed make us happy; those which are to be used assist us and give us a boost, so to speak, as we press on towards our happiness, so that we may reach and hold fast to the things which make us happy.... To enjoy something is to hold fast to it in love for its own sake. To use something is to apply whatever it may be to the purpose of obtaining what you love—if indeed it is something that ought to be loved.”²⁴

²² DDC, 1.1.

²³ DDC, 1.4-5.

²⁴ DDC, 1.7-8.

Augustine thus associates signs with objects of desire while allowing that the relationship between individual signs and things is never fully determined or identified, but is instead structured around the activity of human beings who exist among intermediaries. Augustine draws on the metaphor of a journey, now familiar to us,²⁵ in order to convey the way signs are designed to interface with human desires to lead not only to more signs, but ultimately to the object of desire in the one *thing* to be enjoyed.²⁶

If Christian pedagogy therefore begins with a sacramental entry into the community of the church and the pursuit of divine love through love for others, it is because the material context of practice and proclamation provided by the church habituates one to see in things not only the finite thing itself, but its character as a sign pointing to the source and end of happiness. As one begins to learn how to better love, and thus direct signs toward the object of love, the hierarchy of signification begins to take on the character not merely of something to be pursued, but more deeply of something received. This finally draws the initiate closer to an understanding of the incarnation as something preceding and anchoring the call to faith, as a reality that bestows reality on the learner herself. Augustine gestures at this when he writes, “The things which are to be enjoyed, then, are the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and the Trinity that consists of them, which is a kind of single, supreme thing, shared by all who enjoy it.”²⁷ This proper object of desire—the thing to which all signs ought to be read as pointing—is ultimately that which *secures* the correspondence between words and things.

²⁵ In chapter three, I argue that the *Institutes* stands in the tradition of a medieval theological *itinerarium*, although it amends the common features of this genre in several interesting ways. One such way is that it ends not in the holy city of Jerusalem or by evoking the end of teaching in the *visio Dei*, but rather with a mundane discussion of Christian activity within the earthly city.

²⁶ *DDC*, 1.8-9.

²⁷ *DDC*, 1.10.

The words which we use to express “God,” therefore, obtain intermediary integrity through God’s own desire to be known. Augustine continues:

Yet although nothing can be spoken in a way worthy of God, he has sanctioned the homage of the human voice, and chosen that we should derive pleasure from our words in praise of him. Hence the fact that he is called God [*Deus*]: he himself is not truly known by the sound of these two syllables, yet when the sound strikes the ear it leads all users of the Latin language to think of a supremely excellent and immortal being.²⁸

The thought that is expressed in the name for God is a thought that does not capture its object, but receives from its object its own proper place in the signifying chain.

As the argument proceeds, Augustine repeats this movement, while this time explicitly invoking the force of the incarnation. We see that the incarnation secures the relationship between our silent thoughts and those particular, sensible signs that cultivate the proper orientation of human desire to its invisible object.²⁹ Returning to the metaphor of the journey, he provides an account of why Christians

²⁸ *DDC*, 1.14.

²⁹ Augustine expands on the analogy between words and the incarnated Word later in *De Trinitate*. See, for example, the following passage:

Accordingly, the word that sounds outwardly is the sign of the word that gives light inwardly; which latter has the greater claim to be called a word. For that which is uttered with the mouth of the flesh, is the articulate sound of a word; and is itself also called a word, on account of that to make which outwardly apparent it is itself assumed. For our word is so made in some way into an articulate sound of the body, by assuming that articulate sound by which it may be manifested to men’s senses, as the Word of God was made flesh, by assuming that flesh in which itself also might be manifested to men’s senses. And as our word becomes an articulate sound, yet is not changed into one; so the Word of God became flesh, but far be it from us to say He was changed into flesh. For both that word of ours became an articulate sound, and that other Word became flesh, by assuming it, not by consuming itself so as to be changed into it. And therefore whoever desires to arrive at any likeness, be it of what sort it may, of the Word of God, however in many respects unlike, must not regard the word of ours that sounds in the ears, either when it is uttered in an articulate sound or when it is silently thought. For the words of all tongues that are uttered in sound are also silently thought, and the mind runs over verses while the bodily mouth is silent. And not only the numbers of syllables, but the tunes also of songs, since they are corporeal, and pertain to that sense of the body which is called hearing, are at hand by certain incorporeal images appropriate to them, to those who think of them, and who silently revolve all these things. But we must pass by this, in order to arrive at that word of man, by the likeness of which, be it of what sort it may, the Word of God may be somehow seen as in an enigma (*De Trinitate*, 15.11.21).

are able to journey from flesh to God, or why material signs are able to lead a practicing student to a uniquely transcendent object of enjoyment:

Our minds must be purified so that they are able to perceive that light and hold fast to it. Let us consider this process of cleansing as a trek, or a voyage, to our homeland; though progress towards the one who is ever present is not made through space, but through integrity of purpose and character. This we would be unable to do, if wisdom itself had not deigned to adapt itself to our great weakness and offered us a pattern for living; and it has actually done so in human form because we too are human.... So although [the becoming-flesh of God] is actually our homeland, *it has also made itself the road to our homeland....* What, then, since he was here already, was the reason for his coming, if not that it pleased God to save those who believed through the foolishness of preaching? And what was the manner of his coming, if not this: 'The word was made flesh and lived among us'?³⁰

This argument therefore suggests that the journey of faith is prompted by an initial address that would fail if it were merely “heard,” but succeeds inasmuch as it calls a person into the church—the ecclesial body of Christ—in which she may learn to reorder her desire in relation to other material bodies similarly directed by the aim of divine love. Through this activity, the fundamental truth of the incarnated Word, securing the relationship between signs and things more generally, is not only heard, but practiced. In other words, it inaugurates an embodied and sacramentally-repeated pattern, one in which “foolish preaching” calls a person into a shared material context that is then re-experienced *as* the body of the divinely uttered Word. This repeated practice thus creates within the believer the appropriate capacity to grasp onto the incarnation, and ultimately to assume her place within that divine activity.

Paul Connerton’s argument in *How Societies Remember* helpfully illumines the relationships Augustine animates between interpretation of received signs and the context of concrete, embodied, interactions, and even more deeply between the eristic paradox and certain habitual exercises of

³⁰ DDC, 1.22-23, 25-26. Emphasis mine.

memory.³¹ Connerton's overall aim is to show the extent to which the modern hermeneutical approach to human activity and social ceremonies have wrongly focused on "inscription"—or the rendering of activity into an object of interpretation after the likeness of a text.³² He argues instead that the medium of social memory is better located in a notion of performativity that fundamentally relies upon bodily patterns of habituation.³³ Habituation is a form of memory often overlooked, but one that creates in the embodied subject an underlying network of patterned movements, modes of speaking, and capacities for action that are conceptually prior to memories or claims being grasped through cognition.³⁴

Furthermore, Connerton argues that habits do not only undergird but also many times materially enact or display the very moral or social good which is performed through repetitive, ritualized and ceremonial action.³⁵ Patterns of creating and wearing socially-appropriate clothing at a certain time and place, for example, can be shown to coincide with the normative behavior expected from respective individuals in a given society. In this vein, the wearing of a corset by a wealthy woman in late 19th century Europe should not merely be taken as a conscious message on her part to the larger society that she is conforming to its values and expectations; the corset actually *performs* those values in and through her body at the level of its basic disposition by forming habits of posture, movement, and affect.³⁶ According to Connerton, "The habit-memory—more precisely, the social habit-memory—of the

³¹ Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

³² This recalls my discussion in the first chapter around the relationship between Protestantism and modern approaches to ritual—a relationship which, I argue, should be constructively critiqued and re-thought. It is my hope that this current project will provide some groundwork for recalling and rethinking Protestant approaches of practice and ritualization that do not rely on rendering bodily practices as inscriptions.

³³ Connerton, 4-5.

³⁴ See Connerton, 23-ff.

³⁵ For example, Connerton, 29.

³⁶ Connerton, 33-34.

subject is not identical with that subject's cognitive memory of rules and codes; nor is it simply an additional or supplementary aspect; it is an essential ingredient in the successful and convincing performance of codes and rules."³⁷

This form of habituation, in fact, primarily obtains through group interactions and activities. Connerton writes,

The kind of association that makes possible retention in the memory is not so much one of resemblance or contiguity but rather a community of interests or thoughts. It is not because thoughts are similar that we can evoke them; it is rather because the same group is interested in those memories, and is able to evoke them, that they are assembled together in our minds. Groups provide individuals with frameworks within which their memories are localized and memories are localized by a kind of mapping. We situate what we recollect within the mental spaces provided by the group. But these mental spaces... always refer back to the material spaces that particular social groups occupy.³⁸

By drawing our attention to the importance of habit-memory and to the often-overlooked strategies through which group ceremonies work at the level of habituation, Connerton illumines the logic behind the connection we see in DDC between presence in the church and progressing in one's ability to read, understand, and direct signs to their proper object. If learning is made possible first through the cultivation of non-cognitive bodily habits, then one's physical presence in the community of the church is the first step toward what will ultimately become a reshaping of desire with reference to material and spiritual signs.

This argument can also help us understand the unique role that Augustine grants in DDC to two hermeneutical rules—rules which are not themselves understood to function as signs, but which are used to crucially guide the interpretation of signs. The first is the “rule of faith,” which stands

³⁷ Connerton, 36.

³⁸ Connerton, 37.

committed to teachings concerning the Trinity and incarnation as given in the Gospel of John.³⁹ The second is the “rule of love,” which Augustine describes as follows: “To love God on his account, and to love oneself and one’s neighbor on God’s account. Therefore in dealing with figurative expressions we will observe a rule of this kind: the passage being read should be studied with careful consideration until its interpretation can be connected with the realm of love.”⁴⁰ Both of these interpretive rules are not a mere result of the interpretation of scripture, but are grounded precisely in the material context anchored in the incarnation which precedes, undergirds, and directs the activity of interpretation—which, in other words, cultivates the cognitive, affective, and bodily practices and desires necessary to correctly interpret the text. These rules, in other words, refer directly to the metaphysical and ethical implications of the incarnation, thus constituting the conditions necessary *for* progress.⁴¹ Augustine elucidates this by reiterating the following image: “Christ, who chose to offer himself not only as the possession of those who come to their journey’s end but also as a road for those who come to the beginning of the ways, chose to become flesh.”⁴²

One might object that this signals a mere repetition of the vicious circle with which Augustine’s text begins. If the rules are formulated from the text, how can they be distinguished from the rest of the signs which constitute the text as an object of interpretation? This paradox, which we have seen is first addressed by the doctrine of the incarnation, is further addressed by nature of the concrete connection between the incarnation and the church. The rule of faith and the rule of love are precisely learned not from interpretation but from the activities of listening, obedience, and charity which are taught by

³⁹ *DDC*, 3.5.

⁴⁰ *DDC*, 3.54.

⁴¹ We will later see a subtle repetition of the function of the rule of faith and the rule of love in Calvin’s *duplex cognitio*—the knowledge of God the Creator and the accompanying knowledge of Christ the Redeemer.

⁴² *DDC*, 1.81.

practice and example in the ecclesial context.⁴³ Augustine points to this when he writes that “the church is his body, as the teaching of the apostle shows; it is also called his bride. So he ties together his own body, with its many members performing different tasks, in a bond of unity and love like a healing bandage.”⁴⁴ The body of the church ultimately points back to God: Augustine makes very clear that God does not enjoy human beings on their own merits but rather uses them for God’s own goodness. However, God’s incarnating activity is such that the expression of God’s goodness is deeply tied to human existence: “God relates his use of us to his own goodness. We exist because [God] is good, and we are good to the extent that we exist.”⁴⁵ And it is in this crucial sense that the rule of love actually consummates or completes the rule of faith:

For ‘we walk by faith not by sight,’ and faith will falter if the authority of the holy scriptures is shaken; and if faith falters, love itself decays. For those who lapse in faith, inevitably lapse in love as well, since they cannot love what they do not believe to be true. If on the other hand they both believe and love, then by good conduct and by following the rules of good behavior they have reason to hope that they will attain what they love. So there are these three things which all knowledge and prophecy serve: faith, hope, and love. But faith will be replaced by the sight of visible reality, and hope by the real happiness which we shall attain, whereas love will actually increase when these things pass away.⁴⁶

⁴³ It is possible at this point to better grasp the role of faith in Augustine’s writing which, as I noted in the previous chapter, alerts us to a notable difference when comparing Augustine’s *Enchiridion* to that of Epictetus. Here, the deeply moral and active implications of faith are much more readily apparent, along with the sense in which faith assumes a certain activity of the body. Faith functions not merely as cognitive assent to doctrinal tenets, but more deeply as the holistic, responsive action on the part of the believer to a divine call. It represents a commitment to that call which inaugurates her ability to begin the discursive and habitual practice that will ultimately allow her to progress toward the understanding and vision that follow from learning not only to relate signs to their proper (divine) object, but even more deeply to become reconstituted through activity in the church aimed at resignification. Faith is the relationship between active and passive responses to divine teaching—passive in the aim of habit formation, active in the sense of learning to better read and direct signs. And from the moment in which the believer is sacramentally initiated into the church through baptism, this activity and passivity is always already two aspects of love.

⁴⁴ *DDC*, 1.33.

⁴⁵ *DDC*, 1.75

⁴⁶ *DDC*, 1.89-90.

With this Pauline gloss, Augustine repeats the incarnational response to the eristic paradox at the level of the activity of divine love within the group more generally. Without the habituation brought about through repeated acts of love, the pursuit of faith becomes aimless and groundless—the signs that constitute the scriptural text become unmoored and without meaning. Accordingly, the cohesion of scriptural signs both is rooted in and thus reinforces patterns of activity that respond to the goodness of God with love.

Augustine's theory of signs and things is therefore important for our purposes not only because it provides some key context for Calvin's later arguments concerning the mechanics of sacramental signification; it is also important because it theologically contextualizes the relationship between signs and things (or instruments and ends) *within* the larger relationship between cognitive activity and material habituation—a relationship which I will argue re-emerges, somewhat differently, in Calvin's doctrinal discussions. Inasmuch as Augustine's theory of signs is grounded in the incarnation, he refuses any suggestion that signs or words are, on the one hand, unnecessary, or on the other hand, to be treated as primary.⁴⁷ Instead, the form of cognitive exercise that follows one's commitment to the two orienting rules for the purpose of interpreting signs is itself an important instrument. Like the intermediary of the human teaching, cognitive activity is directed toward the ultimate aim of recollecting the origin and end of human life in and toward divine love. The rules themselves, however, frame the actual path in which cognition assumes an instrumental role.

Furthermore, in a move that will find a clear echo in Calvin's doctrine of the sacraments, Augustine ultimately lifts up the function of certain, specific sacramental signs, which when practiced not only point to things but perform the thing [*res*] to which they point. These sacraments therefore

⁴⁷ See also Jordan, "Words and Word," 196.

parallel and even constitute the embodied activity of the two rules—the activity of faith (performed in baptism) toward the ends of love (performed in the Eucharist). Augustine writes,

But at the present time, when a brilliant demonstration of our freedom has been revealed in the resurrection of our Lord, we are not oppressed by the tiresome necessity of attending to signs, even the signs which we now understand. Instead of many signs there are now but a few signs, simple when performed, inspiring when understood, and holy when practiced, given to us by the teaching of our Lord himself and the apostles, such as the sacrament of baptism and the celebration of the Lord's body and blood. When one understands these, one recognizes with an inner knowledge what [thing] they relate to, and consequently venerates them not because of any carnal slavery but because of one's spiritual freedom. And just as it is a mark of servile weakness to follow the letter and accept the signs rather than the things signified by them, so it is a mark of badly misguided error to interpret signs in a useless way.⁴⁸

This passage not only provides further evidence that the rules of faith and love guiding interpretation are not merely the products of interpretation but rather of forms of habituation that authorize the ongoing activity of interpretation; it also emphasizes that these rules are themselves to be habituated in part through a series of precisely given sacramental practices. We will return to this particular topic at length in the next chapter, paying particular attention not only to Calvin's continuation of these themes but also to the interesting ways that he alters them. For now, let us turn to a more general look at Calvin's method of presenting Christian teaching in contrast to what we have seen from Augustine.

II. Calvin's Pedagogical Framework

In the previous chapter, by parsing the Latin title and the language of Calvin's final preface, I emphasized that the *Institutes* is presented as a teaching manual—albeit one situated in a very different intellectual and institutional economy from that of Augustine, and accordingly aimed at a more specific set of students who are “candidates in sacred theology.”⁴⁹ I also showed the extent to which the

⁴⁸ *DDC*, 3.30-32.

⁴⁹ In this section, we will see that Calvin's understanding of Christian teaching is deeply impacted by his aim of reforming the church. Accordingly, Calvin explicitly directs his theological pedagogy to a more defined and elite class of future leaders rather than Christians in general. However, attention to prior versions of his preface—for example, the preface that appears in French versions prior to 1559—as well as the language of the *Institutes*

Institutes functions as a text preoccupied with interpretation, positioning scripture as the primary interpretive lens to clarify and direct one's relation to layers of material contexts. The *Institutes* thus functions self-consciously as an intermediary teacher aimed at clarifying and directing one's approach to scripture, and through scripture to life in general.⁵⁰ In the course of those discussions, we became familiar with the various ways in which Calvin acknowledges and makes use of the incarnational doubleness at play in the language of the divine *Verbum*, which we have now seen also serves an important role in anchoring Augustine's theory of signs. With these things in mind, the purpose of this section is to grasp the contours of Calvin's method of doctrinal argumentation in comparison and in contrast to Augustine. Ultimately, this will prepare us to look at Calvin's doctrine of providence and understand its relation to his theory of sacramental signification and civil authority. Toward this end, the remainder of this chapter will be dedicated to the early chapters of the *Institutes* in which Calvin presents and performs his distinctive method of doctrinal argumentation. On the one hand, we will see striking similarities between Calvin's understanding of the relationship between argumentation and the role of bodily and affective habituation and that of Augustine. On the other hand, I will assess the most apparent differences that emerge around three areas: (1) the distinction between the pedagogical roles of the creator and the redeemer, (2) the category of *cognitio*, and (3) certain shifts in the role and demarcation of the church.

As the *Institutes* opens, we find Calvin recasting the eristic paradox in his own distinctive manner, using language that both recalls and distances the influence of Augustine. Like Augustine, Calvin connects the existence of humankind to the goodness of God and even recalls the movement of

overall indicate that the stated audience of the 1559 edition is limited for practical reasons, not because Calvin is opposed to using these methods for the general formation of the Christian person in principle.

⁵⁰ See the last section of chapter three where I emphasize that scripture is not to be treated as an end in itself, but as a text to be directed to the needs, concerns, and direction of life. See also Randall Zachman, "Gathering Meaning from the Context: Calvin's Exegetical Method" in *The Journal of Religion* 82:1 (Jan., 2002): 1-26.

desire in restoring the rectitude of that connection. Unlike Augustine, however, Calvin does not immediately summon the incarnation to anchor his solution to the paradox, although the incarnation will indeed play a central role. He begins, rather, by relying on the notion of God as creator to initiate pedagogical progress. In the opening sentences of the *Institutes*, Calvin writes,

For, quite clearly, the mighty gifts with which we are endowed are hardly from ourselves; indeed, our very being is nothing but subsistence in the one God. Then, by these benefits [*bonis*] shed like dew from heaven upon us, we are led as by rivulets to the spring itself. Indeed, our very poverty better discloses the infinitude of benefits reposing in God. The miserable ruin, into which the rebellion of the first man cast us, especially compels us to look upward.... Again, it is certain that one never achieves clear knowledge of self [*puram sui notitiam*] unless one has first looked upon God's face, and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinize the self.⁵¹

Not only does knowledge immediately become a central term, but Calvin quickly alludes to the *visio Dei* not merely as the end of the journey, but also as its beginning. This recalls the language of the labyrinthine countenance of God that confronts one prior to her seeking aid from scripture.⁵² It more deeply suggests a slight but important difference from Augustine's framework. Whereas for Augustine the love for the incarnate God constitutes both the end and the path itself,⁵³ we will see that for Calvin it is the more generalized sense of the divine—layered over both the human mind and the material

⁵¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. McNeill, trans. Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 1.1.1.

⁵² See my discussion in chapter three and *Institutes* 1.6.3.

⁵³ In addition to DDC 1.24 and 1.81 quoted above, see also 1.91-2:

But faith will be replaced by the sight of visible reality, and hope by the real happiness which we shall attain, whereas love will actually increase when these things pass away.... There is this important difference between temporal and eternal things: something temporal is loved more before it is possessed, but will lose its appeal when attained, for it does not satisfy the soul, whose true and certain abode is eternity. No one who desires it is allowed to think more highly of it than is warranted (it would then disappoint when found to be less impressive); but however high one's expectations while on the way, one will find it even more impressive on arrival.

This passage not only highlights the centrality of desire for Augustine in a way that I will argue is recast as piety by Calvin, but it also signals what we will see is an important difference between Augustine and Calvin. Calvin, as we will see, will disorient this distinction between the temporal and eternal.

context of immanent life—and the attendant disposition of piety that comprises both the end and the road.⁵⁴

Calvin's decision to address the reader first with a more generalized discussion of God's relation to creation reflects his aforementioned accordance with creedal, scriptural, and Pauline orders,⁵⁵ as well as his general deference to a long tradition of theological structuring following writers such as Lombard and Aquinas and contemporaries such as Melancthon.⁵⁶ Within this frame, however, Calvin's language distinguishes itself by refusing exposition in favor of a dialectical articulation aimed at connecting teaching on God *to* the sin-stricken material context of the immanent creation—a context that is already the context of the reader. In view of the hermeneutical circle framing the opening of the *Institutes*, this immediate and ongoing concern over the relation between the transcendent glory and the immanent creation, mediated within the human by the *sensus divinitatis*,⁵⁷ performs argumentative work similar to—but not merely equivalent to—the work that the incarnation performs for Augustine.⁵⁸ That is, the question of relating words and things which lurks within any theory of pedagogy or signification is anchored, for Calvin, not only in the incarnation but in a prior natural theology which in DDC remains largely implicit.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ See DDC, 1.24, 1.81.

⁵⁵ See discussion in chapter three as well as chapter seven of Muller's *The Unaccommodated Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012).

⁵⁶ These authors begin their theological teachings with a doctrine of God, followed by or including a doctrine of creation. Framing this as the "knowledge" of God, however, is until this point distinct to Calvin.

⁵⁷ For a fuller discussion of the *sensus divinitatis*, see chapter three's discussion of the *enchiridion*.

⁵⁸ Augustine's theory of signs and things which becomes known through the incarnation and church relies upon a created coincidence of the natural order and natural signs. Calvin's pedagogy is much more clearly structured around this, however, perhaps making his position not as much a distinction from as an interpretation of Augustine.

⁵⁹ For more on this, see Barbara Pitkin's *What Pure Eyes Could See* as well as Paul Helm, "John Calvin, the *sensus divinitatis*, and the noetic effects of sin." In *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 43 (1998): 87-107.

It is characteristic of Calvin's theological method to present doctrines already consciously accommodated to a reader suffering the distortion of the fallen condition.⁶⁰ Calvin's arguments are designed to remedy the *distance* between human beings and their origin and end, but even more importantly the habitual *misapprehension* that compounds that distance. Doctrinal teaching is thus not only about cultivating the ability to respond to the "drops of dew" that lead back to their divine spring—and thus with locating the anchor for the self before, beneath, and beyond the self—although this is part of what Calvin is after.⁶¹ Doctrinal teaching is also aimed at addressing the fact that human beings are constituted emotionally, physically, but most importantly rationally such that they repeatedly fail to move toward God unless they are refashioned. In Calvin's words, "In seeking God, miserable human beings do not rise above themselves as they should, but measure him by the yardstick of their own carnal stupidity, and neglect sound investigation, thus out of curiosity they fly off into empty speculations."⁶² These empty speculations are subsequently materialized as idols.⁶³

The first steps toward correcting this dangerous tendency must, for Calvin, involve a kind of therapy⁶⁴ directed toward correcting human knowledge of God in relation to the most general disposition of life in this world: the order of nature, the seeming chaos of mundane events, and the immanent needs and concerns of an embodied life capable of suffering and living before the inevitability

⁶⁰ As a point of clarification, I am not suggesting that Calvin pretends to know the "unaccommodated truth," but rather that his theological method retains a mimicry of what he sees as God's method of teaching through accommodation. By consciously receiving and applying teaching *in medias res*, Calvin is precisely disavowing a person's ability to exist in an accommodated state.

⁶¹ See *Institutes* 11.1.1. and 1.3.1.

⁶² *Institutes* 1.4.1.

⁶³ For example, *Institutes*, 1.3.1, 1.4.2, 1.5.12.

⁶⁴ Calvin does not use the word therapy; however he emphasizes accommodation again and again, which signals much the same view of how words and ideas can be fit to particular needs in order to exert a change on the part of the subject.

of death.⁶⁵ This first level of reorientation will, in Calvin's writing, be followed by the therapy provided by teaching on the incarnation of Christ the Redeemer. It is crucial to note, however, that the teaching on Christ is conceptually and experientially distinct from the more general truth that the glory of God permeates the immanent world with all of its intermediary networks of causality and necessity. Let us unpack this by looking closely at an important passage. In the second chapter of book one, Calvin writes,

Truly, the knowledge of God [*veró Dei notitia*], as I understand it, is that by which we not only conceive that there is a God but also grasp what befits [*utile*] us and is proper to his glory, in fine, what is to our advantage to know of him. Indeed, we shall not say that, properly speaking, God is known [*cognosci*] where there is no religion [*religio*] or piety [*pietas*]. Here I do not yet touch upon the sort of knowledge [*notitiae*] with which men, in themselves lost and accursed, apprehend God the Redeemer in Christ the Mediator; but I speak only of the primal and simple [knowledge]⁶⁶ to which the very order of nature would have led us if Adam had remained upright. In this ruin of humankind no one now experiences [*sentient*] God either as Father or as Author of salvation or favorable in any way, until Christ the Mediator comes forward to reconcile him to us. Nevertheless, it is one thing to feel [*sentire*] that God as our Maker supports us by his power, governs us by his providence, nourishes us by his goodness, and attends us with all sorts of blessings—and another thing to embrace the grace of reconciliation offered to us in Christ. First, as much in the fashioning of the universe as in the general teaching of Scripture the Lord shows himself to be simply Creator. Then in the face of Christ he shows himself the Redeemer. Of the resulting twofold knowledge [*duplex cognitio*] of God we shall now discuss the first aspect; the second will be dealt with in its proper place.⁶⁷

This passage establishes for Calvin the discreteness of the relationship between God the Creator and the creation as a distinct—incomplete, yet crucial—moment of Christian teaching.⁶⁸ It is not overshadowed

⁶⁵ These are continuous with the features that elicit the discourse on providence that I have discussed in chapter two.

⁶⁶ Battles' translation reiterates the word "knowledge" here, which is absent in the Latin. A pronoun suggests the reiteration of *notus*, although it's clear from the surrounding context ("primal and simple") that Calvin wants to refer to a form of knowledge more general than *notus* strictly speaking.

⁶⁷ *Institutes*, 1.2.1.

⁶⁸ It can be noted at this point that Calvin's difference from DDC on this matter also represents a stark difference from Martin Luther. Contrast, for example, Luther's *Heidelberg Disputations*. Even in places such as *On the Bondage of the Will* where Luther discusses the hiddenness of God, there seems to be little suggestion that the distinction relies upon a distinction between the Creator and the Redeemer.

or superseded by the knowledge of Christ the Mediator, even if it is in certain respects completed by that subsequent teaching.

Calvin here introduces a term to mark the necessary movement for Creator to Redeemer: the *duplex cognitio Dei* or the “twofold knowledge of God,” which should not be confused with the interrelated *cognitio Dei et nostri* that frames the opening of the *Institutes*.⁶⁹ In this passage, however, we see clearly that the “twofold knowledge” refers not to the knowledge of God and self but to two aspects of the knowledge of God: the knowledge of God first merely as Creator, and subsequently as Redeemer. Calvin thus asserts that a deliberate pedagogical progression is immanent to the knowledge of God when it is properly accommodated to human needs; thus, the kind of knowledge attained is contingent upon both the constitution of the knower and the context in which the knowledge is sought. In other words, God is known *as Creator* only as human beings “feel” [*sentire*] and affirm—rather than suppress or fight—the perhaps-dreadful excess that surrounds the spatial and temporal conditions of bodily existence.⁷⁰ Much of this work is performed in Calvin’s arguments on providence. God in turn becomes known *as Redeemer*—as the incarnate and saving God—through the awareness of sin followed by the preaching of the gospel and subsequent practices, both individual and communal, that shape the believer in the likeness of Christ.⁷¹ As we will later see, this *duplex cognitio* ultimately furnishes the full *cognitio nostri* when human beings not only ascribe to God the proper role of creator and governor, but

⁶⁹ For further discussions of the *duplex cognitio Dei* in relation to *cognitio Dei et nostri*, see Muller’s *Unaccommodated Calvin* pp.134-ff; Edward A. Dowey, Jr.’s classic study, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin’s Theology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952); and T.H.L. Parker, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God: A Study in the Theology of John Calvin* (London: Lutterworth, 1962).

⁷⁰ As we saw in the previous chapter, dread marks the initial feeling of an untrained person in the world and that which leads to the creation of idols. See *Institutes*, 1.4.4.

⁷¹ See *Institutes*, 2.1.1-3.

also assume participation through the enactment of the *consignatio*, or covenant of adoption, which is made possible through the incarnation and sealed to believers in sacramental practice.⁷²

For our purposes, grasping the importance Calvin grants to the knowledge of God the Creator underscores why the doctrine of providence plays such a crucial role in Calvin's thought. Providence emerges as the structural and conceptual *end* of human knowledge of God the Creator, or the topic in and through which the doctrines of God and creator perform their most practical work on the life and perception of the believer. As we understand the necessity of the movement from Creator to Redeemer, however, we likewise see that the doctrine of providence does not operate in isolation but relates to, is completed by, and likewise undergirds later doctrines related to Christ and the church. But inasmuch as Calvin emphasizes one's *experience* or *sense* of God as maker, supporter, governor, nourisher, and attendant, he signals the importance of the doctrine of providence as one particular and unavoidable site for habituation toward the end of Christian formation.

Next, it has become quite apparent in the course of our discussion that the category of *cognitio* plays a central role in the basic structure he envisions for Christian teaching. This alerts us to a second way in which Calvin's presentation of Christian teaching stands in contrast to Augustine, who treats "knowledge" as secondary to faith and love across DDC. Although Calvin does situate *cognitio* alongside

⁷² While we will see how the particular logic of adoption comes into play in both the logic of providence and the logic of sacramental signification, it is important to give some background to the role this category plays in Calvin's notion of covenant more generally. Throughout the *Institutes*, Calvin repeatedly qualifies his notion of covenant as a covenant of adoption, referring back to the Abrahamic covenant where God declares to Abraham, "You will be my people, and I will be your God" (see *Institutes* 2.10.8 as well as 2.6.2). In this moment, God declares a relation which did not previously exist at the time in which the divine countenance appeared as a threatening labyrinth (see 1.3.6). The covenant therefore takes on the character of a promise, and from the perspective of the human being it furthermore assumes the structure of an "as if" which immediately precedes performative enactment. This more complex covenantal pattern can therefore also be seen to structure Calvin's particular doctrinal *loci*. With respect to each topic, the Christian is cultivating a response to God's freely given commitment to human life and the world. Calvin furthermore outlines this adoptive covenantal structure particularly with reference to the flesh of Christ in the following passage: "We admit Christ is indeed called 'son' in human flesh; not as believers are sons, by adoption and grace only, but the true and natural, and therefore the only, Son in order that by this mark he may be distinguished from all others" (2.10.8).

a range of other terms, including *sensus*, *afficio*, *pietas*, *religio*, and even the distinctive Augustinian categories of *utilis*, *fructus*, and *beneficium*, one cannot deny that he seems to grant “knowledge” a place of unique significance.⁷³ This marks a distinct shift in tone, not only from Augustine, but from the traditions of theological writing that emerged after Augustine in general. Readers of Calvin—not least the writers of later Calvinist confessions⁷⁴—have often taken Calvin’s emphasis on knowledge as evidence that his chief aim is the pursuit of cognitive certainty concerning matters of belief. However, to come to this conclusion, one would have to overlook the repeated ways Calvin not only critiques the quest for certainty but also relates and even submits the cognitive faculties to other faculties and dispositions such as the senses, piety, and even desire. Along these lines, it is also significant that Calvin does not methodologically *present* doctrines as if their content could be attained, measured, or secured by cognitive soundness alone.⁷⁵ The doctrine of creation provides a case in point. One would be hard-pressed to locate more than a few sentences in book one that straight-forwardly articulate claims concerning the *a priori* nature of creation—that is, creation beyond the level of human experience in a cosmological sense or in prior to the effects of the fall. Such teaching is for Calvin never neatly stated, but always strategically directed to a reader located paradoxically *in medias res*, between the original *sensus divinitatis* and the distortion of sin, or between the concept of the divine and one’s accompanying fear or resentment of God.⁷⁶

⁷³ It is worth noting that Calvin seems to use a range of Latin terms, especially *cognitio* and *notitia*.

⁷⁴ The *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1684), for example, constructs a notion of faith much more associated with certainty in matters of belief.

⁷⁵ Susan Schreiner’s recent book, *Are You Alone Wise? The Search for Certainty in the Early Modern Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) discusses Calvin’s relationship to cognitive certainty at some length. My reading agrees with hers inasmuch as she stresses the sense in which certainty is situated alongside not only perception and affection but is also figured as persuasion rather than cognitive certainty. I remain less convinced, however, that a direct line of influence can be drawn between Calvin’s preoccupation—situated as it is both intersubjectively and in relation to an array of non-cognitive human faculties—and the focus on certainty in early modern thought.

⁷⁶ We will explore this quality of doctrinal accommodation much more deeply in the next chapter. There, I will argue that providence actually *is* the doctrine of creation inasmuch as providence is the site where teaching

The case is similar with the doctrine of God. For example, in lieu of a linear exposition of God's nature or attributes which one might expect after reading contemporaries such as Melancthon or Zwingli, Calvin offers a rhetorically-charged discussion framed by the following reflection:

What is God? Those who pose this question are merely toying with idle speculations. It is more important for us to know of what sort he is and what is consistent with his nature. What good is it to profess with Epicurus some sort of God who has cast aside the care of the world only to amuse himself in idleness? What help is it, in short, to know [*cognoscere*] a God with whom we have nothing to do? Rather, our knowledge [*notitia*] should serve first to teach [*instituat*] us fear and reverence; secondly, with it as our guide and teacher, we should learn to seek every good thing from him, and having received it, to credit it to his account.⁷⁷

We see then that *cognitio*, in spite of its prominence in the text, is never treated in isolation. Instead, it is always related to a wider array of human capacities, affections and concerns: knowledge is *used* to shape the disposition, guide action, and form receptivity. Even more importantly, however, *cognitio* is never treated as the primary category that restores the relationship between human beings and God. Instead, it is presented as a faculty that comes secondary to human acquaintance with and reverence for God, as a faculty which demands our attention primarily because its misuse obfuscates that acquaintance and reverence.⁷⁸ The exercise of knowledge is always already embedded within a life attuned to its own needs and concerns and grasping toward that which exceeds and upholds it. Part of understanding one's place in relation to God, then, is understanding precisely what isolated knowledge can and cannot, or should not, achieve—and thus subverting the tendency of knowledge to form its own

concerning God the creator most directly addresses and can be used to benefit the believer *in medias res*. This also agrees with Schreiner's reading of the relationship between doctrines of creation and providence in her book, *The Theater of His Glory: Nature and Natural Order in the Thought of John Calvin* (Durham, NC: The Labyrinth Press, 1991).

⁷⁷ *Institutes*, 1.2.2.

⁷⁸ As we will soon see, this points to another rhetorical difference between Calvin and earlier authors, including Augustine. He is concerned not only to guide the lost or childish reader toward the cultivation of faith, hope and love, but more to correct pernicious miseducation that subverts the possibility for such guidance.

idols.⁷⁹ In a sense, then, there remains a structural similarity with Augustine across more obvious differences in terminology. While for Augustine the interpretation of signs works to gradually reorient the subject in the chain of signification, for Calvin it is the proper pursuit of knowledge that gradually reorients the subject in relation to things not only known, but felt and loved.

In fact, in a subsequent passage, Calvin further situates “knowledge” this time not only alongside the senses, but also the affections:

And here again we ought to observe that we are called to a knowledge of God [*Dei notitiam*]: not that which, content with empty speculation, merely flips in the brain [*cerebro*], but that which will be sound and fruitful if we duly perceive [*percipiatur*] it, and if it takes root in the heart [*corde*]. For the Lord manifests himself by his powers [*virtutibus*], the force of which we feel [*sentimus*] within ourselves and the benefits [*beneficiis*] of which we enjoy [*fruimur*].⁸⁰

Here, we can note the striking use of an Augustinian tone. Not only does he give priority to the knowledge of acquaintance rooted in the *cor* (heart) rather than the *cerebrum* (mind); he also affirms that such knowledge does not compete with but rather is used by both the senses and the affections toward the end of enjoyment [*fructus*]. Calvin continues this passage as follows:

We must therefore be much more profoundly affected [*affici*] by this knowledge [*cognitione*] than if we were to imagine a God of whom no perception [*sensus*] came through to us. Consequently, we know the most perfect way of seeking God and the most suitable order, is not for us to attempt with bold curiosity to penetrate to the investigation of his essence, which we ought more to adore than meticulously to search out, but for us to contemplate him in his works, whereby he renders himself near and familiar to us, and in some manner communicates [*comunicat*] himself.... It is also fitting, therefore, for us to pursue this particular search for God, which may so hold our mental powers suspended in wonderment as at the same time to stir us deeply. And as Augustine teaches elsewhere, because, disheartened by his greatness, we cannot grasp him, we ought to gaze upon his works, that we may be restored by his goodness.⁸¹

⁷⁹ *Institutes*, 1.4.1.

⁸⁰ *Institutes* 1.5.9.

⁸¹ *Institutes* 1.5.9.

This passage returns us to the connection Calvin claimed at the beginning of book one, chapter two between knowledge and its use [*utile*] or effect. The knowledge of God is properly realized inasmuch as it allows one to holistically encounter God's works; knowledge is thus to be used toward the aim of realizing a form of goodness that rectifies the full array of human faculties. For Calvin, just as the cognitive faculty is related to others such as sense perception and affection, knowledge should not be separated from the broader relationships through which it is activated and ultimately becomes fruitful. This passage emphasizes that just as knowledge of God and knowledge of self are intertwined, the works of God and their effect on human activity are likewise intertwined; together, these lead to the enjoyment of God [*fructus*] that is simultaneously the highest human benefit [*beneficium*].

Calvin's commitment to refusing a bare or speculative notion of knowledge that is not ultimately useful, or that does not give rise to a certain kind of work, sheds additional light on the logic that undergirds the *duplex cognitio Dei*. Just as the knowledge of the Creator and the knowledge of the Redeemer each refer to distinct domains of human experience and thus incorporate different aspects of usefulness, we see that the pattern of knowledge, usefulness, and fruitfulness obtains at the level of the *cognitio Dei* in general. That is, the knowledge of God the Creator is both preparatory for and completed in the unfolding knowledge of God's salvific *works* in Christ. And it is the full *duplex cognitio* that becomes fruitful for the believer.

When we give adequate attention to the many ways Calvin situates *cognitio*—alongside *sensus* and *afficio*; directed toward usefulness and the enjoyment of God in an Augustinian vein; and as signaling precisely the interdependence of self and God from the perspective of the self—it becomes less clear that Calvin's emphasis on knowledge should signal a break with the Augustinian tradition or even a radically different theological anthropology. Instead, it is apparent that Calvin's repeated commitment to knowledge is actually continuous with the pattern of use and enjoyment. What Calvin's

emphasis on *cognitio* does signal, however, in contrast to Augustine, is the *Institutes'* concern not just for the dullness or misdirected desire brought about by the effects of sin, but the additional layer of concern over the detrimental effects of cognitive *miseducation* which Calvin often figures as idolatry. The noetic effects of sin become a topic of central concern for Calvin inasmuch as for Calvin, the human impulse to know is not only distorted but fundamentally creative. That is, the mind creates spectral realities that in turn compound the negative effects of sin. In Calvin's words,

They do not therefore apprehend God as he offers himself, but imagine him as they have fashioned him in their own presumption. When this gulf opens, in whatever direction they move their feet, they cannot but plunge headlong into ruin. Indeed, whatever they afterward attempt by way of worship or service of God, they cannot bring as tribute to him, for they are worshipping not God but a figment and a dream of their own heart.⁸²

As this argument proceeds, it becomes quite clear that the distinctive anxiety exhibited in Calvin's writing concerning misapprehension, the distortion of reason, and resulting idolatry is traceable in part to the particular historical circumstance eliciting his work: namely, his interest in cultivating a reformed church. Unlike Augustine, Calvin views the established church not as the site for positive habituation toward divine love, but rather as an institution fallen victim to a form of idolatry in which "superstition mocks God with pretenses while it tries to please him," or the "many who set up their own false rites to God worship and adore their own ravings."⁸³

Calvin's anxiety over this particular and, to him, urgent problem may best illumine why knowledge rises to the surface as a particular site of problematization. It does not follow from this, however, that the sole pursuit of knowledge comprises the solution to this problem. On the contrary, knowledge comes to the fore because he sees it as that which must become attenuated as a response to the crisis arising in the church. According to Calvin, "Their stupidity is not excusable, since it is caused

⁸² *Institutes*, 1.4.1.

⁸³ *Institutes*, 1.4.3. This critique becomes more and more explicit as the *Institutes* proceeds, culminating in a critique of particular Roman Catholic practices in book four. See 4.2.5-8, 10-11, and 18-19.

not only by vain curiosity but by an inordinate desire to know more than is fitting, joined with a false confidence.”⁸⁴ Neither could Calvin’s aim be properly characterized as a mere, proto-Kantian critique of reason aimed at defining the limits of knowledge.⁸⁵ For in Calvin’s work, the critique of knowledge accompanies a category which assumes a more central role in positively constituting the subject of Christian teaching: piety.

This leads us to the third way in which Calvin’s approach to Christian teaching is different from that which we find in *DDC*—namely, the role of the church in the habituation of love. Recall that for Calvin, *pietas* is on the one hand a term that pervades the text from beginning to end, even underlining the title of the 1536 edition as a *Summa Pietatis*.⁸⁶ On the other hand, *pietas* is never treated as the subject of a teaching, but rather as a disposition both required for and cultivated by progression in Christian pedagogy.⁸⁷ In fact, in a purely structural sense, it seems to serve a similar function to Augustine’s emphasis on love as both the beginning and end of Christian teaching. Just as love guides interpretation, piety for Calvin performs as a rule *for* the use of knowledge rather than as something to be known. With this in view, it is intriguing to realize the extent to which Calvin’s largely-positive appropriation of Augustinian theology seems to actively replace the emphasis on *amor* with the more classically- and civically-intoned *pietas*.⁸⁸ Throughout the *Institutes*, Calvin uses *amor* sparingly. *Pietas*,

⁸⁴ *Institutes*, 1.4.1.

⁸⁵ This is not to suggest that there aren’t some interesting comparisons to be drawn between these two authors.

⁸⁶ For more on the term *pietas*, see my discussion early in chapter three.

⁸⁷ Muller writes, “Piety was to be conjoined with ‘teaching’ or ‘doctrine’: Calvin did not understand it as an exercise separable from his teaching, preaching, and debating” (107).

⁸⁸ Calvin’s early humanist training and interest especially in Stoic philosophy has been well documented. The term *pietas* appears much more prevalently in authors such as Cicero and Seneca than in Augustine, for whom it remains associated much more strictly with civic virtue. See James D. Garrison, *Pietas from Vergil to Dryden* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992).

meanwhile, does not once appear in *DDC*.⁸⁹ However, when Calvin first defines *pietas*, he does so in concert with one of his few invocations of *amore Dei*:

Not only does [God] sustain this universe (as he once founded it) by his boundless might, regulate it by his wisdom, preserve it by his goodness, and especially rule mankind by his righteousness and judgment... but also no drop will be found either of wisdom and light, or of righteousness [*iustitiae*] or power [*potentiae*] or rectitude [*rectitudinis*], or of genuine truth [*syncerae veritatis*], which does not flow from him, and of which he is not the cause. Thus we may learn to await [*expectare*] and seek [*petere*] all these things from him, and thankfully to ascribe them, once received, to him. For this sense [*sensus*] of the powers of God [*Virtutum Dei sensus*] is for us a fit teacher of piety, from which religion is born. I call “piety” that reverence joined with love of God [*amore Dei*] which the knowledge of his benefits induces [*beneficiorum eius notitia conciliat*].⁹⁰

This passage lifts up many of the themes that play a role in the distinctive aim and pattern Calvin envisions for teaching Christian doctrine. First, we are given the distinctive backdrop of God the creator and providential governor whose power and glory is visible in and among creation itself, and who most primally meets human beings through the faculty of sense. Underscoring this, Calvin’s writing subtly reiterates the image of the dew drops which had been first introduced in the opening chapter to underscore the organic nature of God’s connection to God’s works, and ultimately to the sustenance of human life.⁹¹ Finally, we see that this passage situates *pietas* alongside *amor Dei* in a context that is only abstractly, rather than concretely, liturgical.⁹² If for Augustine love was habituated and activated in the concrete context of the church, for Calvin piety is habituated and activated in a pattern of liturgical activity that is occurring, strictly speaking, in a generalized, extra-ecclesial context.

⁸⁹ *Pietas* is not often used by Augustine in general. In *De Civitate Dei*, the term is employed largely with in continuity with the classical tradition in reference to civic life.

⁹⁰ *Institutes*, 1.2.1.

⁹¹ See *Institutes* 1.1.1, also quoted earlier in this section.

⁹² I use “liturgical” to refer to the patterned activity of church practices which include, but are not limited to, the calls and responses of preaching and the sacraments.

Thus far in book one, there has been no explicit mention of the church, no explicit invocation of preaching, no suggestion of the sacraments of baptism or the Lord's Supper. Yet, we find here and elsewhere across these early pages of the text that Calvin's arguments assume a sacramentally-patterned posture of call and response or gift and attribution. The relationship between Calvin's style of teaching and his sacramental theology has been noted by several interpreters of Calvin, perhaps most compellingly in B.A. Gerrish's *Grace and Gratitude*.⁹³ There, Gerrish writes,

What becomes clearer in the final edition of Calvin's *Institutes* is that the father's liberality and his children's answering gratitude, or lack of it, is not only the theme of the Lord's Supper but a fundamental theme, perhaps the most fundamental theme, of an entire system of theology. It conveys, as nothing else can, the heart of Calvin's perception of God, humanity, and the harmony between them that was lost by Adam and restored by Christ.⁹⁴

We have indeed seen that Christian pedagogy is, for Calvin, performed through the activity of learning to interpret various experiences, senses, and objects of cognition by crediting them properly to their divine source, and in so doing cultivating the disposition of piety. This pattern of activity is a sacramental one, in part, in terms of its choreography: the movements involve the recollection of the divine *consignatio* with creation, the scriptural signs through which it becomes visibly restored, and the responsive posture of thanksgiving: "Thus we may learn to await and seek all these things from him, and thankfully to ascribe them, once received, to him."⁹⁵ It is sacramental also in its enactment; that is, Christian teaching writ large re-performs the divine signification that undergirds the original relationship between the glory of God and the creation.

⁹³ B.A. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1973). Gerrish has referred to this connection between Calvin's anthropology, epistemology, and sacramental theology as Calvin's general commitment to the human as "Eucharistic man [sic]." See, for example, Gerrish, 50.

⁹⁴ Gerrish, *Grace*, 20. In many ways, this project shares deep agreement with Gerrish's argument, but is more interested in exploring and extending ritual and political implications.

⁹⁵ *Institutes*, 1.2.1, from the previous quote.

In one sense, then, Calvin is simultaneously recalling and refusing Augustine's emphasis on the church as the privileged site of habituation in love. He is recalling it insofar as he retains distinctively ecclesial patterns of practice which he will only later concretize. But he is refusing it insofar as the primacy of the church is displaced by the domain of creation generally speaking, and centrality of love is displaced by a virtue more fit for the layered domains of immanent life: piety. It is likely that these differences arise in part out of the circumstances of the time that would render Calvin himself outside of what many would recognize as "the church." On another level, however, the privilege Calvin grants to the wider domain of immanent life as the site of pedagogical habituation also signals the positive adoption of a distinctly Pauline tone. Like Paul, and following Augustine, Calvin will ultimately anchor the possibility of Christian teaching's escaping the eristic paradox in the "foolish preaching" of the incarnation. However, Calvin's writing also activates certain Pauline tactics which were passed over by Augustine—tactics which Paul would similarly employ to construct arguments for the negotiation of identity and citizenship in a time of turmoil.⁹⁶ Like Paul, Calvin is eager to evoke an original, materialized relation between Creator and creation prior to the accommodations furnished by God through the covenants preceding and undergirding the incarnation. Calvin, like Paul, will readily admit that owing to the fall, this original relation is no longer sufficient to furnish complete knowledge of God and ourselves. However, for Calvin, this more basic relation between Creator and creature constitutes the capacious domain that is ultimately the site of God's redemptive work.

So while Calvin clearly re-occupies much of Augustine's approach to Christian teaching, he ultimately does so in the context of an itinerary more clearly adapted from the *ordo docendi* of the epistle to the Romans which itself moves from creation and fall to civic life and church.⁹⁷ See, for

⁹⁶ For a helpful treatment of Paul in relation to these questions, see the first chapter of Lupton's *Citizen-Saints*.

⁹⁷ This is largely in agreement with Muller, who emphasizes the importance of the Romans *ordo*. Muller, 137.

example, a passage from book two in which Calvin again returns to the use found in distinguishing the *duplex cognitio Dei*:

The natural order was that the frame of the universe should be the school in which we were to learn piety, and from it pass over to eternal life and perfect felicity. But after [the] rebellion, our eyes—wherever they turn—encounter God’s curse. This curse, while it seizes and envelops innocent creatures through our fault, must overwhelm our souls with despair. For even if God wills to manifest his fatherly favor to us in many ways, yet we cannot by contemplating the universe infer that he is Father. Rather, conscience presses us within and shows in our sin just cause for his disowning us and not regarding or recognizing us as his sons.... We must, for this reason, come to Paul’s statement: ‘Since in the wisdom of God the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of preaching to save those who believe.’ This magnificent theater of heaven and earth, crammed with innumerable miracles, Paul calls the ‘wisdom of God.’ Contemplating it, we ought in wisdom to have known God. But because we have profited so little by it, he calls us to the faith of Christ.... Therefore, although the preaching of the cross does not agree with our human inclination, if we desire to return to God our Author and Maker, from whom we have been estranged, in order that he may again begin to be our Father, we ought nevertheless to embrace it humbly.⁹⁸

This passage recalls much of what we have encountered in our investigation of Calvin’s doctrinal pedagogy. In it, we are reminded that Christian teaching restores human sight and status—it enables humans to once again see God as the benevolent father, and ourselves as children.⁹⁹ This is precisely how the “knowledge of God and ourselves” is achieved: not through speculation, but the sacramentally-structured pattern of reception and response. The basic movements are the same as in Augustine’s theory of signs: learning to read signs means assuming one’s place within the chain of signification. But ultimately for Calvin, the venue in which this is realized is the material world generally, and its attendant disposition is that of a piety that desires to assume its proper place in the order of that world.

At the conclusion of this chapter, we therefore can locate in Calvin’s writing the pattern of an *ordo docendi* that operates at a perpendicular plane from the overarching *ordo docendi* that governs the

⁹⁸ *Institutes*, 2.6.1.

⁹⁹ Notice that, in this passage, it is the human *conscience* which obscures one’s status as a child of God, rather than God’s *de facto* declaration. Even the distortion of sin which renders one “guilty” is therefore described by Calvin as a failure to see, as evidence of the damaged faculty of human beings rather than the something declared by God.

text from beginning to end, from natural order to civil order. This pedagogical order structures particular doctrinal discussions by addressing some domain of life distorted by sin, grasping it, and re-perceiving it in its relation to God by means of scriptural and traditional teachings, and then returning to that site in order to put that knowledge to use and realize its benefit. This activity of sense, perception, knowledge, use, and enjoyment is for Calvin both driven and directed toward the continued cultivation of the religious and civic virtue of piety. This pattern of teaching is, in one sense, treated as the teaching of the church. We have seen already both that Calvin envisions his work as standing in the continuity of church teaching,¹⁰⁰ and himself as a doctor of the church. We have also seen, however, that Calvin's work is deeply concerned with what he sees as the active misdirection of church teaching.

Indeed, in open contestation with certain readings of Augustine, Calvin will later argue that scripture founds the church rather than the inverse.¹⁰¹ And while Calvin will argue for a robust, visible role for what he claims to be the apostolic church,¹⁰² this argument will not meet the reader until the journey's end—until after the believer has been reoriented in relation to the knowledge of God with respect to creation, human being in Christ, and Christian practices. This would suggest that where Augustine points candidly to the church as the primary and prerequisite site for giving birth to Christian selves and habituating them in love, Calvin's concern over the corruption of the church leads him to reactivate the tradition in other ways that place the concrete institution of the church alongside—at the culmination rather than initiation—of a range of extra-ecclesial material sites for habituation in piety. Not least among these is the providential structure and nature of the immanent world more generally.

¹⁰⁰ See Calvin's preface to the 1559 edition and my discussion of it in chapter three.

¹⁰¹ *Institutes* 1.7.3. In this passage, Calvin is attempting to reorient the emphasis Augustine places on the church by distinguishing the pattern of Christian teaching from the order of authority. Whether or not one agrees with his attempt to claim Augustine as an ally, it is clear that he wants to make an argument that allows the role of scripture in principle to exceed the establishment of the church as an institution.

¹⁰² Calvin refigures the apostolic church not as determined by succession but rather by the content of teaching and the pattern of practice. See *Institutes*, 4.8.9.

At the same time, by generalizing the liturgical and sacramental pattern of call and response as the activity of one disposed to piety, Calvin is appealing to the formative *patterns* of ecclesial activity such that they rely more upon the physical body of Christ in the incarnation than upon the particular institution of the church in order to obtain. We are now prepared to look closely at the doctrines of providence and sacraments in order to grasp how these doctrines fit together toward the larger aim of cultivating the reformed Christian citizen.

Chapter 5

Providence, Affirmation, and Signification: The Anchoring of Reform

In a very interesting essay outlining the influence of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's Genevan upbringing on his later political writings, Pamela A. Mason provides a sketch of the profoundly Reformed civic culture which still permeated early-eighteenth century Genevan life.¹ Mason translates and quotes a 1728 sermon in which the city's reformation-era motto, *Post Tenebras, Lux*,² continues to play a formative role in Genevan identity:

*A People made anew, a People created: Our allies & we, we are this People which God has formed, this People which he has pulled, so to speak, out of nothingness, in an amazing manner. Who would have said, a few years before the Reformation, that such a great revolution would occur all over Europe, who would have said that a small number of Persons, pious, striving toward truth & enlightened, [but] powerless, without authority, without credit, would produce such a great change, one would have regarded that prospect as a vision pure and simple, as the least probable thing in the world. Nevertheless, that is what happened. God said once more, Let There Be Light, & there was Light. He revived the dry bones of Ezekiel's vision. He created an entirely new World; a World, consequently, which is obliged to celebrate him, as the Author of its subsistence.*³

The role of the language of creation in this testament to the city's religious and civic spirit is unmistakable, as are the traces of the affective patterning which was noted in the previous section: the Genevans, through piety, strive to enact a world that originates entirely by the authority and action of God. The activity of the people, accordingly, is one of praise and gratitude. Another theme, which will occupy our discussion of providence, is the role of these people as intermediaries in the order and

¹ Mason, Pamela A., "The Communion of Citizens: Calvinist Themes in Rousseau's Theory of the State," *Polity* 26:1 (Autumn, 1993): 25-49.

² In English, "After darkness, light." This had been the motto for Geneva since approximately 1540, when the phrase appeared in an official letter requesting Calvin to return to the city after a brief exile. See, for example, John T. McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954), 157.

³ This is Mason's translation of a selection from Jean-Alphonse Turretin, *Sermons sur le jubilé de la Réformation établie il y a deux-cens Ans, dans les Eglises de la très illustre & très puissante République de Berne. 7. Janvier 1728*. Emphases in original. Mason, 29.

development of world affairs—as producers, yet not as the source of power; as actors, yet not sole authors.

Mason ultimately focuses on the sense in which this theological and historical narrative frames the people of Geneva precisely as “a People”:

The Reformation story, in its myriad tellings, disclosed to Genevans who they were: *des gens* transformed, by the grace of God, into *un peuple*. It is not surprising, then, that even in the eighteenth century it was as Calvinists that Genevans learned to be citizens, and it was through the prism of public faith that they understood themselves as a public. Calvinism and republicanism were two dimensions of one common Genevan identity.⁴

This image of Geneva, for one, calls into question the sense in which Calvin’s Geneva operated as a theocracy.⁵ Though the term is commonly associated with Geneva, it is refused by many scholars.⁶ What is indisputably true is that Calvin’s city was theologically constituted and implemented a number of disciplinary measures inspired by that theology.⁷ What remains of interest to this study—and what we must keep in mind across the argument of this chapter—is how civic life and the ideal of the citizen

⁴ Mason, 29.

⁵ For discussions of the structure of Calvin’s Geneva and its relation to theocracy, see William G. Naphy, “Calvin’s Geneva” in *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin*, edited by Donald K. McKim (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 25-40; and “Geneva II,” in *The Calvin Handbook*, ed. Herman J. Selderhuis (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 44-56; *Calvin and the Consolidation of the Genevan Reformation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003); and the discussion of Calvin in Ronald Wintrobe and Mario Ferrero, ed., *The Political Economy of Theocracy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 100-103.

⁶ Geneva maintained a system of government hierarchically ordered from a General Council (all male citizens over the age of twenty which met annually to elect officers on the smaller councils). The smallest and most powerful of these consisted of twenty-five people who met daily, overseen by four presiding officers. One of these four officers oversaw the Consistory, which was otherwise composed of pastors and church elders. While the consistory was tasked with overseeing the behavior of the city and had the power to mete out a range of lesser punishments (usually admonishments and ex-communications) for moral crimes, it was always structurally and legally subservient to the hierarchy of governmental councils. For more, see Robert M. Kingdon, *Adultery and Divorce in Calvin’s Geneva* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995) and Robert Kingdon, ed., *Registers of the Consistory of Geneva in the Time of Calvin*, Volume 1: 1542-1544 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing company, 1996).

⁷ Though Calvin’s writing discusses discipline in the sense of regulations concerning church membership in good standing, I use “disciplinary measures” here in the Foucauldian sense to refer to mechanisms that regulate the collective behavior of bodies. The fullest discussion can be found in *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

became reconstituted by a theological project of reform that re-envisioned the status of material life is related to transcendent determination. The social and political restructuring that is effected in part through Calvin's theological writing does not merely replace the transcendent position of monarch or bishop atop the hierarchy with some notion of God, scripture, or minister, or even the people themselves.⁸ Instead, as we have already begun to see, Calvin is interested in notions of transcendence and immanence that are, from the human perspective, structurally interrelated to one another just as the glory of God is interrelated with nature, or as the knowledge of God is interrelated with the knowledge of ourselves.⁹

Mason thus goes on to argue that the logic of citizenship in Calvin's Geneva relied on a certain understanding of the church as both a concrete and local community and subsequently as an abstract body existing in the unity of faith and love, a movement undergirded by the structure of the covenant of adoption—another Calvinian teaching which will be unpacked in the course of this chapter.¹⁰ Within the logic of adoption, the concrete and local community is renamed and then subsequently lives into its status as children of God. Part of this gradual becoming is the collective process of what Calvin constantly calls "sanctification"—a process anchored by an orderly society that tends the needs of human life, but truly implemented by the adjoining apparatus of the discipline of the church.¹¹ Calvin's innovation, however, is found in the new emphasis he gives to the material world as an end in itself—the end in which the concrete unity of Christian life in the church, properly directed toward the abstract

⁸ Christopher Elwood's work is once more helpful in understanding the relationship between Calvin's sacramental signification and currents of power in the political organization. See Elwood, *The Body Broken* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁹ The sense in which this is and is not true from the divine perspective will be treated in the subsequent discussion of providence.

¹⁰ Mason, 30-32.

¹¹ For more on Calvin's concept of sanctification and its relation to faith, see, e.g., John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. McNeill, trans. Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 1.14.2, 2.2.16, and 3.1.14.

unity of the body of Christ, decisively involves the local unity of the city. As we will soon see in detail, the movement from the special to the general and the overall posture of affirmation toward the immanent world as the location where divine naming is realized are all indelible features of Calvin's distinctive doctrine of providence.

As such, the Augustinian enterprise of calling persons into the church for Christian training in exercises of signifying memory through practices in faith and love lingers in Calvin's work, but becomes differently oriented. Calvin's writing re-inhabits that structure while becoming concerned with ways that Christian teaching may critically refashion the structures of immanent life as *an* end in itself—as the site of a certain kind of *visio Dei* constituted through the Spirit rather than a mere means toward the transcendent *visio Dei*. In this way, Christian teaching becomes capable not only of critiquing the church, but of enacting a reformed church, the practices of which can then engage and anchor other reformed aspects of earthly life. This involves, as we will see, arguments that capaciously rethink the relation of the divine to immanent life in general. We find arguments of just this sort in Calvin's doctrine of providence. And these arguments ultimately point to a vision of the church that not only prepares believers habitually, affectively and cognitively for the *visio Dei*, but equally envisions a “people” with an important role in enacting that vision through the immanent activity of the life.

Understanding the theological arguments that shape these notions of re-creation, re-formation, and re-signification will be the aim of this chapter. In what follows, I will examine the doctrine of providence, ultimately relating it to Calvin's teaching on the law, the Trinity, the covenant of adoption, and most importantly sacramental signification. My overall aim is to grasp finally how these doctrines interface with each other to forward the aim [*scopus*] of the *itinerarium* of the *Institutes*.

I. The overall shape of Calvin's doctrine of providence

Calvin's discusses providence in the last four chapters of the *Institutes*' first book, introducing the doctrine¹² as structurally immanent to the doctrine of creation with the following claim: "To make God a momentary Creator, who once for all finished his work, would be cold and barren, and we must differ from profane men especially in that we see the presence of divine power shining as much in the continuing state of the universe as in its inception."¹³ Reading this in isolation, one might expect that this doctrine follows a clearly articulated doctrine of creation "in its inception"—perhaps one in which Calvin instructs readers concerning teachings such as *creatio ex nihilo*, the six-day creation sequence, or a precise description of the prelapsarian relationship between God, the world, and human being. To be sure, all of these topics do appear within the first book of the *Institutes*. However, as we have seen in the previous chapter, one would be hard-pressed to locate a place in which Calvin articulates any one of them as a straight-forward exposition. Instead, we find that fragmentary propositions concerning creation are addressed specifically to a certain kind of reader who is located *in medias res*—enmeshed in life, disoriented, and plagued by the dullness and distortion of her cognitive, perceptive, and affective faculties.¹⁴

¹² I follow Calvin's stylistic lead in using "doctrine" in a general sense to refer to a specific topic of Christian teaching. This should not be taken to suggest that Calvin sees doctrines as fixed and internally coherent conceptual categories. As I have argued in the previous two chapters, his treatment of commonplaces contrasts with a contemporary such as Melancthon insofar as Calvin presents teachings *in medias res*—within the overarching framework of the dialectical process of coming to know ourselves in relation to God—rather than encyclopedically.

¹³ *Institutes* 1.16.1.

¹⁴ This agrees with Heiko Oberman's observation of Calvin's method:

Calvin tries in the *Institutes* to order 'the data of revelation,' constantly warning that he does so only "or the purposes of teaching" (*docendi causa*)—a self-limitation constantly ignored by his later interpreters. He cannot and does not claim to smooth all corners or present a complete system. God reveals what is necessary to know, live, and survive without granting insight into the "ultimate" metaphysical cohesion of these "glimpses" (258).

Thus, even Calvin's characteristically glowing depictions of the original glorious creation and God's intimate relationship to it are, upon closer inspection, always offered alongside statements acknowledging the devastating effects of sin on one's very ability to receive this doctrinal teaching. For example, when addressing the scriptural order of creation, he immediately considers the multiple ways in which this scriptural mode of presenting the creation is accommodated to the particular needs of fallen minds, suggesting reasons such as the following: due to the "slowness and dullness of our wit," we require a more distinct depiction of God's relation to the creation so as not to be distracted by idols;¹⁵ in order to resist myths and fables, we moreover require a story that begins with one God as the founder of the universe; and to put a limit on the working of the mind which will otherwise occupy itself in useless speculation, the creation story supplies a concrete, historical starting point, beyond which we ought not to inquire.¹⁶

Calvin's treatment of the Trinity in book one provides a very interesting example of how Calvin deals with speculative ideas, relating them to use. His explicit discussion of the Trinity in a series of *disputationes* arrives well into book one, wedged between a series of chapters on how the true God may be distinguished from idolatry. Because he would normally rely on scriptural teaching to refute forms of idolatry, the Trinity provides Calvin with a unique problem—for not only the term "Trinity," but also the so-called "layers of verbiage"¹⁷ designed to give an account of the Trinity such as "hypostases," "person," "subsistence," and "*homoousios*" are absent from the teaching of scripture itself.¹⁸ Calvin first

Oberman, "The Pursuit of Happiness: Calvin Between Humanism and Reformation," in O'Malley, ed., *Humanity and Divinity in Renaissance and Reformation: Essays in Honor of Charles Trinkaus*. (Leiden: Brill, 1993).

¹⁵ One way of framing an analysis of Calvin's doctrine of providence is that it is an analysis of how Calvin justifies a form of engagement with God in the world that is "safe" from idolatry.

¹⁶ *Institutes*, 1.13.1.

¹⁷ *Institutes*, 1.13.4.

¹⁸ See *Institutes* 1.8 for Calvin's *disputatio* on the Trinity, and 1.8.3-5 for his particular treatment of its "verbiage."

addresses this dilemma by offering a very interesting argument against the reification of scriptural words over and against the divine revelation itself, and one which once again bears the influential marks of Augustine's rules of interpretation:

We ought to seek from Scripture a sure rule for both thinking and speaking, to which both the thoughts of our minds and the words of our mouths should be conformed. But what prevents us from explaining in clearer words those matters in Scripture which perplex and hinder our understanding, yet which conscientiously and faithfully serve the truth of Scripture itself, and are made use of sparingly and modestly and on due occasion?¹⁹

Calvin thus insists that such words are only useful inasmuch as they work to clarify the scriptural teaching, and proceeds to relate the terms to places in scripture where distinction and relationality are attributed to the unity of God's essence.

His anxiety, however, is evident across the chapter. Calvin exhorts his readers to "dearly love soberness" and "be content with the measure of faith, [to] receive in brief form what is useful to know."²⁰ He furthermore reiterates the labyrinth image as a warning: "But if some distinction does exist in the one divinity of Father, Son, and Spirit—something hard to grasp—and occasions to certain minds more difficulty and trouble than is expedient, let it be remembered that the human mind, when it indulges curiosity, enters into a labyrinth."²¹ And, perhaps most tellingly, he ends his lengthy discussion with a disclaimer rather than with a conclusion:

Finally, I trust that the whole sum of this doctrine will be faithfully explained, if my readers will impose a limit upon their curiosity, and not seek out for themselves more eagerly than is proper from troublesome and perplexed disputations. For I suspect that those who intemperately delight in speculation will not at all be satisfied. Certainly I have not shrewdly omitted anything that I might think to be against me: but while I am zealous for the edification of the church, I felt that I would be better advised to not touch upon many things that would profit but little, and

¹⁹ *Institutes* 1.13.3.

²⁰ *Institutes* 1.13.20.

²¹ *Institutes* 1.13.21.

would burden my readers with useless trouble. For what is the point in disputing whether the Father always begets?²²

If it were the case that this is Calvin's last word on the topic in the *Institutes*, it would be decidedly unsatisfactory. However, as I argue in this chapter, an explicit understanding of and use of the economic Trinity fundamentally structures not only the coherence but the practical pattern of Calvin's doctrinal discussions from providence through the sacraments. Similarly fragmentary claims concerning the doctrine of God and the doctrine of creation appear across book one, making clear to the reader that these are not in fact to be received as a linear, *a priori* exposition, but rather as a form of argumentation designed to fit doctrinal teaching to the muddled features of fallen but divinely-occupied human life. The circumstances into and through which an argument is made affects the way that argumentation is carried out: it is no longer possible to simply assume that a doctrine could be recounted neutrally, irrespective of the concrete condition of the audience, any more than spectacles would be useful apart from the relationship between the eye and some particular object to see.

Given what we have seen of the stylistic and argumentative features of book one, it is interesting that Calvin grants the mechanics and purpose of divine providence a much more extended and coherent treatment than any prior topic.²³ The reason for this may be illumined by recalling the logic of the *itinerarium*, which would suggest that the shape and character of both the actual terrain and the goal of the journey will affect the significance of each stop along the route. That is, each location on the map is not an end in itself, but is situated to prepare the traveler in some way to reach the destination. It would therefore make little sense to extract one particular location from its relationship journey itself. To do so would be to redraw the map and reorient its destination [*scopus*]²⁴—which, in the

²² *Institutes* 1.13.29.

²³ In fact, if one were assigned to list the topics treated in book one according to the emphasis and space they are given, the only other topics Calvin discusses at such great length is the opening discussion of *cognitio Dei et nostri* and idolatry. Resistance to idolatry, in fact, provides the backdrop for all the more fragmentary treatments of the trinity, the creation, scripture, etc.

example of the doctrine of the Trinity, would likely leave the traveler quite unsatisfied with her destination. The shape of book one thus suggests that, at least within this single book, providence *is* the target [*scopus*] to which these other topics are persuasively directed. It is not quite right, then, to say that the doctrine of providence follows *from* the doctrine of creation; rather, providence is the culmination *of* the doctrine of creation, or more appropriately, the doctrine of God the Creator. It is the particular way of talking about creation that most acutely and fruitfully addresses the human needs and concerns around God's nature in relation to creation.²⁴ It is finally the place where knowing the Trinity becomes of benefit to life—where knowledge, use, and benefit intersect around the particular *cognitio Dei creatoris*.

Calvin's early sentences introducing providence affirm that within it, the student finally grasps the full import of the doctrine of creation itself:

For even though the minds of the impious too are compelled by merely looking upon earth and heaven to rise up to the Creator, yet faith has its own peculiar way of assigning the whole credit for Creation to God.... For unless we pass on to his providence—however we may seem both to comprehend with the mind and to confess with the tongue—we do not yet properly grasp what it means to say: "God is creator."²⁵

Here we find a reiteration of the distinctive, sacramental shape of doctrinal teaching that we have seen him frame in the early chapters of book one.²⁶ Providence is understood by faith as participating in the relation of gift and gratitude: awareness of providence first inculcates in a person the awareness of creation *as* the realm of divine governance, and subsequently calls on that person to ascribe the order of material life ultimately to the graciousness of God.

²⁴ This reading agrees with Susan Schreiner's characterization of providence not as a doctrine alongside the doctrine of creation, but as the height of the doctrine of creation. See Schreiner, 37, 97. See also Charles Partee, *Calvin and Classical Philosophy* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 130.

²⁵ *Institutes* 1.16.1.

²⁶ See chapter four.

It is within this particular framework that Calvin proceeds to explicate his understanding of the mechanics of divine governance, claiming a priority for the divine “will” [*voluntas*] that has since earned a widespread reputation for its stridency. The aim of this section will be to look at the more general contours of Calvin’s view of providential activity in relation to the world and human beings before more carefully unpacking these mechanics. Along these lines, I will first be looking at how Calvin’s words on providence inhabit the structure he has already set up in the earlier chapters of book one: they teach by appealing not merely to the mind, but by actively shape the perception, affection, and activity of the body in relation to the larger causal structures of the immanent world. Later, as I assess the shape and function of Calvin’s arguments on providence, I will relate them both to the features of the discourse on providence in earlier texts as presented in chapter two, and finally to their role within Calvin’s larger project in concert with book four’s doctrine of the church, word, and sacraments.

As Calvin lays out his argument for the nature of God’s providential activity, he makes clear that he views God to be active and involved in the immanent operations of the world without mitigation or attenuation. Calvin’s reputation for advancing a form of divine determinism is not without some apparent evidence.²⁷ Calvin claims that “all events are governed by God’s secret plan [*occulto Dei consilio gubernari*],”²⁸ and that nothing “exercise[s] its own power except in so far as it is directed [*dirigutur*] by God’s ever-present hand.”²⁹ He returns to this language throughout his discussion of providence, only to further emphasize the all-encompassing nature of this divine activity: “There is no

²⁷ For a treatment of the merit of this common characterization, see Charles Partee, --. “Calvin and Determinism.” In *Christian Scholar’s Review* 5, no. 2 (1975): 123-8.

²⁸ *Institutes* 1.16.2. My thanks to Mark Jordan for pointing out that Battles’ rendering of *consilium* as “plan” may be misleading. In Scholastic terminology, *consilium* is the intellectual act that precedes choice or *electio*. It is concerned with means, not ends: it is a form of “backwards” reasoning from a desired end to the available means. See e.g. Thomas, *Summa Theologica* 1-2.14. Also, in Scholastic terminology, *gubernatio* is regularly contrasted with physical determination. Against this backdrop, the apparent evidence for more rigid determinism is further discredited.

²⁹ *Institutes*, 1.16.2.

erratic power, or action, or motion in creatures, but... they are governed by God's secret plan [*arcano Dei consilio sic regi*] in such a way that nothing happens except what is knowingly and willingly decreed [*sciente et volente decretum*] by him."³⁰ And, a bit later: "We must prove God so attends to the regulation of individual events, and they all so proceed from his set plan [*definito eius consilio*], that nothing takes place [*contingat*] by chance [*fortui*]."³¹

At the same time, however, Calvin nuances his position, first by explicitly repudiating what he calls the "Stoics' dogma of fate." Calvin writes,

We do not conceive a necessity out of the perpetual connection and intimately related series of causes [*necessitatem comminiscimur ex perpetuo causarum nexu et implicita serie*], which is contained in nature; but we make God the ruler and governor [*arbitrum ac moderatorem*] of all things, who in accordance with his wisdom has from the farthest limit of eternity decreed [*decrevit*] what he was going to do, and now by his might carries out what he has decreed.³²

This position would seem to push Calvin firmly toward the company of Christian authors like Boethius, Augustine, and Aquinas, who, when addressing the question of providence, wants to maintain a God who is separate from and irreducible to the order of nature rightly perceived, and thus distinct from the "nexus of causes" observable in the world. On the other hand, however, Calvin seems to take great pains to subvert any notion of God's providence that can be chiefly characterized by God's spatial or temporal distance *from* the world. For instance, Calvin denies that providence can be characterized by "bare foreknowledge" in no uncertain terms.³³

Alongside this, it is striking to notice the range of terms Calvin uses to figure God's providential relation to the world—words that emphasize the closeness of God's relationship to the order of the

³⁰ *Institutes*, 1.16.3.

³¹ *Institutes*, 1.16.4.

³² *Institutes*, 1.16.8.

³³ *Institutes* 1.16.4. Foreknowledge is in fact treated by Calvin often as only one form or dimension of providence.

world in such a way that we may recall the aforementioned passage from early in book one in which Calvin sides *with* the Stoics against Epicurean materialism.³⁴

I confess, of course, that it can be said reverently, provided it proceeds from a reverent mind, that nature is God; but because it is a harsh and improper saying, since nature is rather the order prescribed by God, it is harmful in such weighty matters, in which special devotion is due, to involve God confusedly in the inferior course of his works.³⁵

In spite of Calvin's immediate and expected disavowals, we see him dialectically carving out a role for divine providence that is neither reducible to nor separable from the creation—a role that he paints with vibrant language. In *Institutes* 1.16.1 alone, we find the following terms used to characterize the nature of God's oversight: "shine," "create," "preserving and governing activity," "energy," "sustain," "nourish," "care," and "quicken." And on the part of human beings, providence is said to be experienced or received as "inspiration," "contemplation," "feeling of grace," "taste of special care," and finally "the knowledge of fatherly favor."³⁶

Calvin is therefore neither satisfied with an understanding of providence that links God to the immanent network of causes in creation itself, nor with a kind of ontological separation that relies upon notions of intellective faculties for mediation. Instead, he posits and explicates a specific notion of will [*voluntas*] that is distinguished from causality in a material sense, yet operates through the affirmation or occasional limitation or overriding of material causes. In this way, God's will meets a person precisely in its close relation to the real structure of immanent causation. This is so almost to the point of superimposition: Calvin insists that God's will is at work in every immanent cause, yet never to the point

³⁴ For more on Calvin's critique of Epicureanism, see chapter one of Schreiner, *The Theater of His Glory*; chapter seven of Partee, *Calvin and Classical Philosophy*; for more trajectories Stoicism and Epicureanism during the Renaissance, see Charles Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness: Humanity and Divinity in Italian Humanist Thought*, two volumes (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), especially part one.

³⁵ *Institutes* 1.5.5.

³⁶ *Institutes* 1.16.1.

of an ontological collapse. On the one hand, Calvin uses an example of the occasionally-disjunctive relation between the divine will and the created order to maintain that the two can never be identified:

Yet the Lord, to claim the whole credit for all these [causes], willed that, before he created the sun, light should come to be and earth be filled with all manner of herbs and fruits. Therefore a godly man will not make the sun either the principal or the necessary cause of all things which existed before the creation of the sun, but merely the instrument that God uses because he so wills.³⁷

However, when he characterizes the kind of will he has in mind, Calvin emphasizes the will in terms of its interest and activity:

And truly God claims, and would have us grant, omnipotence—not the empty, idle, and almost unconscious sort that the Sophists imagine, but a watchful, effective, active sort, engaged in ceaseless activity.... For when, in The Psalms, it is said that “he does whatever he wills,” a certain and deliberate will is meant. For it would be senseless to interpret the words of the prophet after the manner of philosophers, that God is the first agent because he is the beginning and cause of all motion; for in times of adversity believers comfort themselves with the solace that they suffer nothing except by God’s ordinance and command, for they are under his hand. But if God’s governance is so extended to all his works, it is a childish cavil to enclose it within the stream of nature. Indeed, those as much *defraud God of his glory as themselves of a most profitable doctrine* who confine God’s providence to such narrow limits as though he allowed all things by a free course to be borne along according to a universal law of nature.³⁸

We see here again the characteristic linkage between the will, its interest in human life, and the benefit of that knowledge *for* human life. And it is interesting to note, at this point, that the specific human benefit associated with providence is linked in particular to the *glory* of God—to the category Calvin characteristically uses to connect the presence of God to the creation in a relation that is neither identity, nor cause, nor even finality strictly speaking. The glory of God, rather, recalls the structure of the *sensus divinitatis* with which Calvin opened the doctrine of creation earlier in book one. This sense of the divine, in its unfallen form, would provide human beings with the capacity to see the glory of God

³⁷ *Institutes*, 1.16.1.

³⁸ *Institutes*, 1.16.3. Emphasis mine.

shining forth from the creation—not *because* of its order or causal elegance, but because they would understand God’s relation to it.³⁹

In some finite respects, Calvin’s view here resonates with Stoic views of providence—at least inasmuch as the discourse on providence assumes the order of nature rightly perceived, or the adjustment between preconceptions⁴⁰ and the ideas that allow the order of nature to be rightly perceived. But Calvin retains a thoroughly Christian and Augustinian notion of God inasmuch as the category of “glory” speaks to an economy in relation to the immanent order that engages it with ends that exceed the immanent order. In other words, providence leads to salvation not by calling a person to adjust her expectations according to the necessities of nature, but rather to learn to engage mundane events and causal structures with revealed ends in mind. Put another way, Calvin’s providence is located within immanence, but directed more specifically to a divine-human relationship that transcends immanence by returning providence to the fundamental linkage between the knowledge of God and ourselves. For Calvin, there is no sense of the knowledge of God that is not given with the analogically-related similarity and dissimilarity of knowledge concerning human being.⁴¹ One could

³⁹ See *Institutes* 1.3.1-3, 1.6.1 as well as my argument about the relationship of this structure vis-à-vis scripture to Epictetus’ *Enchiridion* in chapter three.

⁴⁰ See chapter three’s and four’s discussion of the *sensus divinitatis*, which some scholars have linked to Stoic origins. See David Steinmetz, “Calvin and the Natural Knowledge of God” in *Via Augustini: Augustine in the Later Middle Ages, Renaissance and Reformation, Essays in Honor of Damasus Trapp, OSA*, ed. Heiko A. Oberman and Frank A. James III, 198-214 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991); Paul Helm, “John Calvin, the *sensus divinitatis*, and the noetic effects of sin,” in *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 43 (1998): 87-107.

⁴¹ The classic discussion of analogy as it pertains to theological method is Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I.13. Analogy secures a way of speaking about God without mistakenly assuming that our words and God’s being and nature are synonymous. According to Aquinas,

For we can name God only from creatures. Thus whatever is said of God and creatures, is said according to the relation of a creature to God as its principle and cause, wherein all perfections of things pre-exist excellently. Now this mode of community of idea is a mean between pure equivocation and simple univocation. For in analogies the idea is not, as it is in univocals, one and the same, yet it is not totally diverse as in equivocals; but a term which is thus used in a multiple sense signifies various proportions to some one thing (Answer, Article 5).

rightly see this a particularly anthropocentric doctrine of providence if only one keeps in mind that for Calvin, human being is never complete without its relationship to the divine; and it is *that* relationship of the human to the divine which fundamentally anchors Calvin's doctrine of providence. According to Calvin,

When Abraham said to his son, "God will provide," he meant not only to assert God's foreknowledge of a future event, but to cast the care of a matter unknown to him upon the will of Him who is wont to give a way out of things perplexed and confused. Whence it follows that providence is lodged in the act; for many babble too ignorantly of bare foreknowledge. Not so crass is the error of those who attribute a governance to God, but of a confused and mixed sort, as I have said, namely, one that by a general motion revolves and drives the system of the universe, with its several parts, but which does not specifically direct the action of individual creatures.⁴²

One can perhaps begin to anticipate the way this providential pattern anticipates the incarnation and the church. Providence is fundamentally about God acting within, through and toward the material world as the created and perpetual site of God's glory—and teaching on providence accommodates human creatures to perceive and participate in the activity of that glory. The incarnation of Christ the Mediator, the Word and Spirit, and the establishment of the Church and Sacraments are all key moments of this special providential accommodation directed at human beings embedded in the world.

Within the arc of the text, however, we remain in the doctrine of creation, and it is important to emphasize the particular way the general and particular interplay at this point. Providence has the effect of anchoring every aspect of human life at its most general—in its mortal, material state of mundane concern—to its origin in and active relation to the creator. But even at this level, it is

When God is spoken of analogically, there is always both a proportional similarity and dissimilarity which must be determined in relation to the double linguistic referent. For a discussion on Calvin's use of analogy, see Randall Zachman, *John Calvin as Pastor, Teacher, and Theologian* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), chapter ten.

⁴² *Institutes*, 1.16.4. McNeill notes that Calvin is here criticizing Cicero's *Nature of the Gods*. See *Institutes*, ed. McNeill, 202.

characterized by its special activity—its anthropocentrism, but also its special activity with respect to different humans or people groups at different times—functions as conceptually prior to its general order.⁴³ And it is here that Calvin departs from some aspects of Stoicism.⁴⁴ When he stresses God’s close relation to the natural order and the circumstances of material life, we consistently find him relating providence to the particular human experience of earthly life rather than to an impersonal causal order. Calvin makes this quite explicit, writing, “Because we know that the universe was established especially for the sake of humankind, we ought to look for this purpose in his governance also.”⁴⁵

Charles Partee writes that within the arc of Calvin’s theology, God’s relation to the world is always specially and deliberately enacted before it can become generalized; or we could say that the diffusion of God’s gracious action in structuring the signification of things more generally always follows from a special and particular relation first performed by God. Concerning this pattern in relation to providence, Partee writes,

Calvin does not make special grace depend on common grace nor special providence depend on universal providence. On the contrary, Calvin’s main purpose is to insist that God does not sit idly in heaven but governs the world and that the doctrine of universal providence is only a partial understanding of God’s providence. Therefore in discussing God’s special providence, which he is chiefly concerned to emphasize, Calvin writes, “The sun discovers to our eyes the most beautiful theater of the earth and heaven and the whole order of nature, but God has visibly displayed the chief glory of his work in his Son” The purpose of Calvin’s discussion of

⁴³ Calvin will also use the “special” versus “general” relationship to refer to grace. This largely occurs in book two where Calvin is discussing salvation. There may be a structural similarity, then, but “special” providence has to do with the governing activity of God with respect to God’s creation rather than with the salvation or special help given to human beings. General grace, then, refers to God’s kindness which is dispensed without regard to election. See *Institutes* 2.2, especially sections 5, 6, and 17.

⁴⁴ Stoic philosophers sometimes admitted anthropomorphism, particularly concerning the sense in which the gods share virtues to be cultivated in human beings. For a longer discussion, see P.A. Brunt, *Studies in Stoicism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 494.

⁴⁵ *Institutes*, 1.16.6.

universal providence is... to insist that the whole order of nature is the result of the special providence of God.⁴⁶

This not only points, as we have seen, to the way providence already participates in the *duplex cognitio Dei*⁴⁷ and points forward to the specialized action of the Redeemer; it also clarifies the force of the complex relation Calvin is trying to construct between transcendence and immanence.⁴⁸ In refusing either the option of a distant and determining God on the one hand and a God whose will is reduced to immanent causal necessity on the other, Calvin constructs a relationship between God and the world that fundamentally takes on the shape of a “special act.” These particular acts are constitutive of the generalized order of the world, but are not identified with it: they conceptually precede it. These acts are also constitutive of the human beings’ ability to most fruitfully use the knowledge of providence not as an achievement of speculative knowledge or as a merely particular experience, but as a gift that secures and establishes a more general pattern of action, knowledge, and experience.

I will soon discuss how this pattern undergirds the connection between providence and Calvin’s theology of sacramental signification. In a more general sense, it signals the Eucharistic relation of Calvin’s theology more generally. Providence is not only about the bodily and affective pattern of proper ascription to God and attendant gratefulness on the part of the Christian.⁴⁹ It is also about a pattern of general signification that is anchored in a special coincidence between sign and signified. It is

⁴⁶ Partee, *Classical*, 129. The internal quote is from Calvin’s Commentary on John 9:5 (CO 47.220).

⁴⁷ See discussion in chapter four.

⁴⁸ It is worth noting here the implicit presence of the Trinitarian structure, even when Calvin is self-consciously restricting his focus to the role of the knowledge of God the Creator. Inasmuch as that knowledge is part of the *duplex cognitio Dei*, it suggests a consistent role for the Spirit across the various modes of teaching in spite of the fact that Calvin does not explicitly discuss the works of the Spirit until book three. This will be discussed in greater depth later in the chapter.

⁴⁹ See chapter four.

because we witness the special gesture of God vis-à-vis creation that we can learn to perceive and participate in the providential activity of God more generally.

Calvin, however, does not stop with these general contours. Although he is resistant to speculation, in the chapters that follow his introduction to providence he provides a more complex account of the specific mechanics of God's providential activity and its relationship to the real causal complex and the intermediaries that comprise the structure of creation. Our next step is therefore to unpack this structure in order to better grasp the ethical orientation of providence, or what this providential activity addressed to human beings *does* to human responsiveness and self-knowledge at a more general level. Calvin suggests as much at the beginning of chapter seventeen, when he reiterates the language of his last preface⁵⁰ particularly with respect to the work of providential claims: "Any who do not hold fast to a good and right use of this doctrine can hardly avoid entangling themselves in inscrutable difficulties. Therefore it is expedient here to discuss briefly *to what end* Scripture teaches that all things are divinely ordained."⁵¹ With the overarching framework of providence now in view, let us turn to Calvin's more technical discussion of the doctrine itself—of divine will and its executive function in relation to intermediaries.

II. The mechanics of providence: the divine will, the human will, and the role of intermediaries

If Calvin's overall view of providence is predicated on the distinction and relation between God and the world, Calvin's more precise teaching on the mechanics of providence demands that we distinguish and relate the range of conceptual terms he uses to characterize how creative, providential action continually *meets* the world. For, as he makes repeatedly clear, "God's providence does not

⁵⁰ This was discussed in chapter three.

⁵¹ *Institutes* 1.17.1. Emphasis mine.

always meet us in its naked form, but God in a sense clothes it with the means employed.”⁵² Our task now is to look more deeply into the nature of this clothing. One key pairing that cuts across Calvin’s view of providence is the distinction between the *voluntas*, which carries a range of meanings including will, desire, disposition, favor, affection, goal, purpose, signification, and the real existence of *instrumentum* or *causas inferiores*—instruments or lower causes. There is an additional category that will come to nuance the role of the divine *voluntas*: *decretum* [decree, decision, order].⁵³ I will look at this in time; but first, I will discuss the nature of *voluntas* within Calvin’s thought and the various relationships it animates.

As the term *causas inferiores* implies, Calvin wants to maintain from the outset that God’s will is the first (efficient) and final cause of all earthly events, which is in many respects an uncontroversial Christian position to hold. Because God is eternal, thus existing outside of the spatial and temporal dimensions of creation, God’s creative act is responsible in a general sense for all subsequent events. And, like Augustine and many other subsequent Christian authors, Calvin holds that God directs the creation toward its final end. We find him thus quickly associating God’s will with God’s justice: “But we must so cherish moderation that we do not try to make God render account to us, but so reverence his secret judgments as to consider his will [*voluntas*] the truly just cause [*iustissima causa*] of all things.”⁵⁴ However, it would be a mistake to take this view to mean that because something occurs, it is *ipso facto* just, or that it occurred *solely* because of the causal activity of God’s will. Rather, the emphasis ought to be put on “just”: God’s will is the *just* cause, not the sole cause, of all things. That is, because Calvin maintains a distinction between God and creation, he maintains another crucial distinction between the particular activity of the “will” in relation to events, and the activity of other causal actors. One way that

⁵² *Institutes*, 1.17.4.

⁵³ I here primarily provide the Latin terms because several of these terms can be multiply rendered in English.

⁵⁴ *Institutes*, 1.17.1.

Calvin characterizes God's will in relation to earthly events is explicitly relative to the material and efficient causal functions within created conditions: "God out of the pure light of his justice and wisdom tempers and directs [worldly disturbances] in the best-conceived order to a right end."⁵⁵ In this language of "tempering" and "directing," we can already observe a distinction between efficient causes, which may be immanently explicable, and the final causality of the divine will.

Voluntas therefore already takes on several dimensions of activity. Because the divine will initiates creative activity *ex nihilo*, it is the first (efficient) cause; and furthermore, because it subsequently joins with the internal causes of the creation itself for the purposes of final causality, it takes on the character of a *just* or benevolent cause.⁵⁶ Calvin is clear that God does not act occasionalistically, directly causing everything, but that created causes are real; Calvin is also clear that God is actively involved in the ongoing government of creation; the question that remains is *how* God's will engages creation. Susan Schreiner has emphasized the negative activity of God's providential will by pointing out Calvin's use of "bridle" imagery, which Calvin makes use of in his sermons and commentary on Job: "For Calvin, the 'bridle of divine providence' curbs the wicked and the devil lest they completely overturn all order and make life unlivable."⁵⁷ The bridling activity of the will could be linked to a form of active efficient causality alongside other (created) efficient causes. However, I will argue in this section that there is a third function for God's providential will attached to those of directing things and bridling creation: namely, that it functions to affirm the existence of creation and the conditions of earthly life, in

⁵⁵ *Institutes*, 1.17.1.

⁵⁶ That is, because God is always working toward good ends from beyond and alongside creation, the justice of a cause is never fully apparent in time.

⁵⁷ Schreiner, *Theater*, 30. See also Schreiner's study specifically on Calvin's sermons on Job, *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found? Calvin's Exegesis of Job from Medieval and Modern Perspectives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

spite of the post-lapsarian effects,⁵⁸ as the chosen place of the ongoing divine presence. The affirming will of providence is different from the other forms of efficient and final causality inasmuch as it is not a cause per se, but a will to maintain the life of creation holistically as a particular theater of causes, conditions, relationships, and ends. And this will is revealed through special acts of affirmation, such as the incarnation, the church and scripture, and the real presence in the sacraments. I will discuss the connection between the movements of providence and the other doctrines which are illumined by the frame of providence later in this chapter. The aim of this section will be to grasp how God's will operates actively, and without mere permission, not to undermine or leap over but rather to affirm the creation and its really-existing material conditions and causal streams.

I have already argued that, for Calvin, special providential activity precedes the operation of general providence. This pattern illumines the move from the first sense of providence as the first cause to the second sense as limiting or directing a causal complex that attains a relative but independent existence. To understand the way that God's will functions to limit and direct intermediaries, it is important to grasp that God's will in relation to creation is fundamentally non-competitive: that is, God's will does not undermine, but comes alongside other causal factors which are also part and parcel of creation. Its activity can therefore be understood as relational in character.⁵⁹ Calvin's commitment to this is first observable in the role he does give to the natural causes that comprise the "general" or "universal" providence that follows after "special" providence. Calvin writes,

Yet I do not wholly repudiate what is said concerning universal providence, provided they in turn grant me that the universe is ruled by God, not only because he watches over the order of nature set by himself, but because he exercises especial care over each of his works. It is,

⁵⁸ The difference between Calvin's account and other accounts that ascribe finite freedoms to created beings is that Calvin consistently insists that we not view God's will as "merely permissive" (see 1.18.1). I am arguing that where others posit a permissive will, Calvin is positing an affirming will.

⁵⁹ For more on the relational re-orientation of ontology characteristic to the Reformers, see Oberman, "The Pursuit of Happiness," 265-ff.

indeed, true that the several kinds of things are moved by a secret impulse of nature, as if they obeyed God's eternal command, and what God has once determined flows on by itself.⁶⁰

We may conclude from this that all wills operative with respect to an event are partial causes, but not all causes directly attributed to wills. Other types of causes flow outward from God's initial creative acts and thus follow particular gestures of special providence.

This raises the further question of how different kinds of *wills*—human wills, the wills of malevolent powers—relate to God's providence. Calvin stresses that, like intermediary causes, God's will does not supplant or absolve the importance of human self-direction. Rather, the structure of general providence invites a human being bearing the *imago Dei* to deliberate, act, and enact care in relation by means of the will. According to Calvin,

“A man's heart plans his way, but the Lord will direct his steps.” This means that we are not at all hindered by God's eternal decrees [*aeternis Dei decretis*] either from looking ahead for ourselves or from putting all our affairs in order, but always in submission to his will [*volute*]. The reason is obvious. For he who has set the limits to our life has at the same time entrusted to us [*nos deposuit*] its care [*curam*]; he has provided means and helps to preserve⁶¹ [*instruxit*] it; he has also made us able to foresee dangers; that they may not overwhelm us unaware, he has offered precautions and remedies.⁶²

For Calvin, the doctrine of providence would thus be misunderstood if it was assumed to strip either the phenomenology or the reality of deliberate human determinations of will from the sphere of life.

Human beings can and ought to will and reasonably expect many of their determinations to come to fruition, whether those determinations are for good or ill. This follows, again, from the distinction

⁶⁰ *Institutes* 1.16.4.

⁶¹ A better translation may be “to build up.”

⁶² *Institutes*, 1.17.4.

between God and the immanent order that Calvin has already established: the faculties and capacities of human beings are also real, if finite.⁶³

Within this scheme, the human will plays a limited but authentic role in causing events—enough, Calvin will say, that God cannot be blamed for evils, but limited in that God’s will is always the first and just cause.⁶⁴ This position may be, and has often been, taken as a failed attempt on the part of Calvin to have it both ways. If he is able to maintain a robust role for human deliberation, the freedom and power of God—and more importantly the certainty of providential comfort and control—are under threat. If, however, Calvin maintains the priority of the divine will in securing outcomes, the role of human beings amounts to little more than mere instrumentality or blind obedience, thus unsatisfactorily ignoring the complex set of issues that shape the ethical life from the human perspective.⁶⁵ Against this dichotomy, I want to argue that grasping the affirmative character of providence within Calvin’s account provides a way into understanding how Calvin offers a coherent account of divine priority and the reality of human activity, and moreover one that is at least ethically interesting in its construction of human life between materiality and the transcendence of divine revelation.

Let us first look at how Calvin—in conversation with Augustine—defends the reality of other wills alongside God’s will.

When we do not grasp how God wills to take place what he forbids to be done, let us recall our mental incapacity, and at the same time consider that the light in which God dwells is not without reason called unapproachable, because it is overspread with darkness. Therefore all godly and modest folk readily agree with this saying of Augustine: “Sometimes with a good will a

⁶³ Note that this is the topic of Calvin’s debate with Osiander which takes place across the *Institutes*. See 1.15.3-5, 2.12, and 3.10.4-3.11.11.

⁶⁴ See, for example, *Institutes*, 1.17.5, 1.18.4. Goods are directly and ultimately attributable to the special activity of God’s grace alongside real human deliberation.

⁶⁵ For a helpful discussion of this problematic, see Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988).

person wills something which God does not will.... For example, a good son wills that his father live, whom God wills to die. Again, it can happen that the same man wills with a bad will what God wills with a good will. For example, a bad son wills that his father die; God also wills this. That is, the former wills what God does not will; but the latter wills what God also wills. And yet the filial piety of the former, even though he wills something other than God wills, is more consonant with God's good will than the impiety of the latter, who wills the same thing as God does. There is a great difference between what is fitting for a human to will and what is fitting for God, and to what end the will of each is directed, so that it be either approved or disapproved. For through the bad wills of evil humans God fulfills what he justly wills."⁶⁶

The conclusion of this passage echoes the claim we saw above: that God's will is not the sole, but the *just* cause of all things.⁶⁷ More importantly, however, this passage helps us to understand what, for Calvin, the will *is*. Here, we see that like Augustine, Calvin assumes that the will operates against a backdrop of a desire that moves it toward an end. The bad son desires ill for his father, and wills for him to die; the good son desires good for his father, wills for him to live. What, then, can we know of the character of God's desire—a desire which cannot but be perceived as overwhelming the more limited scope of human life and deliberation? What does increased knowledge concerning God's desire *do* to the way human life is disposed in the world?⁶⁸

This question brings us to the argumentative center of Calvin's doctrine of providence, where Calvin must persuade a reader that the overwhelming God who once inspired fear and dread to sin-warped minds and bodies now, as a result of this scripture-guided teaching, ought to be honored and trusted as a providential Father who desires the wellbeing of his children. We likewise find ourselves in

⁶⁶ Calvin, 1.18.3, ellipses in text.

⁶⁷ Calvin's commitment to the distinction between will and cause is further evident in a passage from book two. Discussing God's salvific work in the context of the *cognitio Dei redemptoris*, Calvin concludes: "Therefore we see no inconsistency in assigning the same deed to God, Satan, and a human; but the distinction in purpose and manner causes God's justice to shine forth blameless there, while the wickedness of Satan and of a human betrays itself by its own disgrace" (*Institutes* 2.4.2).

⁶⁸ There is an important sense in which human willing, for Calvin, ought to be directed toward intending the will of God. However, Calvin's emphasis on real intermediaries maintains a practical aspect to that intention. In other words, human beings intending to will God's will are faced with the question of what kind of action that implies—which is why it is important to understand the *kind* of activity God's will does (affirming, bridling, and directing events toward just ends.)

the familiar structure of the discourse on providence (chapter two), in which arguments function to shape a container through which the world is reframed and better engaged. For Calvin, this means resisting the “thought [that] creeps in that human affairs turn and whirl at the blind urge of fortune... as if God were making sport of men by throwing them around like balls,”⁶⁹ and instead practicing living in the world *as if* managed and overseen by an omnipotent God who actively limits, directs, and guides all earthly events toward the just and good end that God both desires and has the power to see through to its conclusion.⁷⁰ But inscribed within this very scheme, important questions arise: What are the argumentative means through which human being can transition from the *experience* of these two divine wills—the will that sanctions all events including evil and suffering, and the will that works toward justice? And, on the flip side, if those apparently-two wills are to be effectively integrated into one will—in concert with the re-orientation of the human will through salvation and Christian teaching—what is the practical activity of that *one* will with respect to the world?

Let us first look at how Calvin addresses the perceived problem of two wills, which he recognizes is one that emerges out of the very structure he has established for divine providence, namely between the conceptual disjunction of the *first* and *just* cause. This is also where the issue of the law comes to the fore. If God’s will is rightly associated with God’s law—as discerned through scriptural teaching—

⁶⁹ *Institutes* 1.17.1.

⁷⁰ Calvin uses the fictive “as if”—which can be read as a link to the mythic or narrative importance of the discourse on providence in using arguments to shape a larger view of the world (see chapter two)—in both positive and negative ways. As in the quote above (1.17.1), Calvin uses “as if” to refer to wrong ways of viewing the whole: that God is making sport of humans by throwing them around like balls, or in another place, that humans live “as if” a sword hung over their head (1.17.10). However, when speaking of justification in book three, he explicitly uses these terms to describe the justified state of the believer: it is “as if their innocence were confirmed” (3.11.3). And in book four, see a passage concerning Eucharistic signification which I will discuss at greater length soon: “Now, that sacred partaking of his flesh and blood, by which Christ pours his life into us, *as if* it penetrated into our bones and marrow, he also testifies and seals in the Supper—not by presenting a vain and empty sign, but by manifesting there the effectiveness of his Spirit to fulfill what he promises” (4.17.10, emphasis Calvin’s). At stake here from the human perspective is a reorienting of narrative, not a disavowal of narrative in favor of something qualitatively different. From the perspective of that new narrative, the reorienting is the result of salvific grace.

then how can we account for a divine will that plays an important causal role in events that explicitly run contrary to that law? Calvin vigorously denies, without hesitation, that God has two wills. He maintains that the problem does not lie in the being or activity of God, but rather in the sin-fraught relationship between human cognition and God.⁷¹ The extent to which the problem can be assuaged depends, however, on what *kind* of “other” will is being posited on the part of God. If God’s will remains associated with the revealed law, then the two wills remain a phenomenological facet of even pious human experience. However, it may be that the relationship between the revealed law and the workings of the natural world can be mapped with more clarity through the category of affirmation. That is, God’s will not only affirms the existence and conditions of the world as such—affirms this relatively independent existence of created things—but also wills a certain treatment and disposition of them through the revealed law. If so, it is possible in principle to learn to approach the divine will not as transparent in terms of its intentional activity, but as a kind of choreographed activity engaged with reference to other things. For Calvin, this activity can be learned, by human beings, through sanctification, in which participation in God through Christ’s divine humanity is possible.⁷²

To parse this issue with more precision, it is helpful to consider the positive role Calvin grants to the hiddenness of God, or the sense in which God’s will can never be entirely transparent to human understanding. B.A. Gerrish’s classic essay, “‘To the Unknown God’: Luther and Calvin on the Hiddenness of God,” provides some helpful conceptual tools to determine what Calvin is and is not claiming with respect to a “hidden” will of God. Gerrish distinguishes between two forms of hiddenness

⁷¹ See *Institutes* 1.17.13. The disjunction which leads to human beings to posit erroneous propositions such as that God has two wills is also the structure which requires divine accommodation.

⁷² I will unpack these steps in the pages that follow. The doctrine of adoption becomes especially important in understanding how re-signification—or re-naming—fosters a kind of non-ontological participation through the status of justification and the attendant activity of sanctification.

that cut especially across the Lutheran corpus, but which are also visible in Calvin's writing.⁷³ Gerrish calls "Hiddenness I" the claim that God's aims are hidden *in* God's revelation. "Hiddenness II," on the other hand, points to an additional space in which God's aims are other than God's revelation and entirely remote from human view. We find Hiddenness I closely associated with Luther's doctrine of *sub contrario* rooted in the *theologia crucis*. In *The Bondage of the Will*, for example, Luther claims that God is known under God's opposite [*sub contrario*], the paradigmatic site being that of the crucifixion:

Faith's object is in things not seen. That there may be room for faith, therefore, all that is believed must be hidden. Yet it is not hidden more deeply than under a contrary appearance of sight, sense and experience. Thus, when God quickens, He does so by killing; when He justifies, He does so by pronouncing guilty; when He carries up to heaven, He does so by bringing down to hell. As Scripture says in 1 Kings, 'the Lord kills and makes alive; He brings down to the grave and brings up.' Thus God conceals His eternal mercy and loving kindness beneath eternal wrath, His righteousness beneath unrighteousness.⁷⁴

For Luther, God's will being hidden in God's revelation serves to upset the expectation that human reason can find any cause in appearances that would neatly align with human expectations concerning the will of God. What it does *not* do is separate God's salvific activity from the occurrences that would seem to stand in tension with certain ideas of salvation. The aim of this position is to cultivate the deep commitment of faith in God's promises rather than reliance upon human faculties that, if given priority, will only enclose one in the "bondage" of isolation from God. This pattern is similar to that of Calvin's view of the noetic effects of sin, effects that spark the creation of idols and specters that compound the distance between human awareness and the nature of God's activity in the world.

One key difference between Luther and Calvin, however, is that Calvin is much more eager to link God's activity with creation in a more general sense, while Luther's thinking is more squarely

⁷³ Gerrish, "'To the Unknown God': Luther and Calvin on the Hiddenness of God," *The Journal of Religion* 53:3 (1973), 263-4.

⁷⁴ Martin Luther, *On the Bondage of the Will* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1994), 101

Christological. For Calvin, God “covers” or “hides” God’s self in the intermediaries that mediate providential activity and thus “clothe” the will of God. This is a clear repetition of the theme I emphasized in the previous chapter: Calvin, more explicitly than even Augustine, places a significant emphasis on the creation as the location in and through which the knowledge of God and self—and thus the formation of the Christian—is first constituted and thus first *re*-constituted.⁷⁵ Still, the overall character of Hiddenness I remains in Calvin’s view; that is, Calvin maintains that God’s hiddenness is related paradoxically to material appearances and events, rather than separated from them.⁷⁶ There is therefore, in this view, a version of transcendence operative within and through immanence, rather than in a conceptual or real space removed from immanence. Furthermore, as we have seen, Calvin is fond of ultimately framing the visibility of God in and among creation using the term “glory”—a term

⁷⁵ Another factor that distinguishes Calvin from Luther has to do with Calvin’s view of the law and its effect on his view of faith, which I will look at in the second part of this chapter.

⁷⁶ Calvin, for example, will use the word “under” [*sub*] at various points to describe God’s relation to visible things, which is referentially suggestive of Luther’s doctrine of the *sub contrario* (which I will discuss presently). For Luther, *sub* also appears in his discussions of the sacramental presence as being hidden “in, with, and under” ordinary things. See the *Formula of Concord*, Article VII, The Holy Supper of Christ. Cf. Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism* (1529), “It is the true body and blood of the Lord Christ in and under the bread and wine, which we Christians are commanded by Christ’s word to eat and drink.”

As I will discuss in greater detail later in this chapter, Calvin’s theology of sacramental signification differs from Luther’s, and the traces of that difference are perhaps visible in the different way he uses these propositions to signal how God may be known in relation to the world. For example, Calvin writes that the knowledge of God the Redeemer was “first disclosed to the fathers under the law, and then to us in the gospel” (2.1.1). First, it is notable that neither knowledge of Christ (nor knowledge of God) is synonymous to the content of the law, but that it is related to it in a paradoxical sense. I would argue that there is something about the way the law disposes a person toward the world that is revelatory of the final end of God’s will. Later, when Calvin discusses his own theory of the sacraments, he writes that “the sacraments... are exercises which make us more certain of the trustworthiness of God’s Word. And because we are of the flesh, they are shown us under [*sub*] things of flesh, to instruct us according to our dull capacity, and to lead us by the hand as tutors lead children” (4.14.6). Here, once more, sacramental signification entails an affirmation and then a disposition of material things. It is not that God is merely present under all material things, rather God is active with respect to material things to direct them in specially-oriented ways.

Luther employs only disparagingly.⁷⁷ Once again, we see a threefold outline emerge from Calvin's view in the movement from creation to hiddenness in creation to the manifestation of glory.

"Hiddenness II," on the other hand, is the more troubling claim that God has a hidden will operative outside of the revealed commitments of the divine character. One can see how this suggestion would emerge in part from problematics that surround Christology, particularly the question of *who* or *what* God-in-Christ is saving human beings *from*. Overcoming Hiddenness II, then, amounts to overcoming what several authors have called the Gnostic temptation at the heart of Christian theology, which responds to these theological tensions by separating Christ from God and spirituality from carnality.⁷⁸ For Luther as for Calvin, this specter arises particularly around their discussions of

⁷⁷ In Luther's *Heidelberg Disputations*, he famously pits a theology of glory against a theology of the cross. See, for example, theses 19-21:

19. That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the "invisible" things of God as though they were clearly "perceptible in those things which have actually happened,"

20. he deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.

21. A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.

When Luther glosses these theses, he critiques the tendency to associate human conceptions of glory with divine glory, underscoring the paradoxical nature of God being revealed *sub contrario* or under God's opposite (for more, see the previous note as well as my subsequent discussion in this chapter). Calvin, on the other hand, seems to want to bring human perception into a more positive alignment with knowledge of the divine. This tendency is apparent, for one, in Calvin's view of the *sensus divinitatis* which is damaged by the fall but partially accommodated by the spectacles of scripture (see chapter four). Similarly, Calvin's positive use of the law (which will also be discussed in this chapter) suggests that sanctification leads ideally to a situation in which human appraisals of earthly life align positively (though never perfectly) with divine appraisals.

⁷⁸ Hans Blumenberg emphasizes this tension in Christian thought as part of his theory of the legitimacy of modernity as an alternate system of values. See Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983). For an analysis of Blumenberg's argument, see Benjamin Lazier, "Overcoming Gnosticism: Hans Jonas, Hans Blumenberg, and the Legitimacy of the Natural World," in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 64.4 (2003): 619-637. For a theologically-oriented discussion of this tendency with respect to atonement theory, see S. Mark Heim, *Saved From Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2006), 201-ff.

predestination.⁷⁹ Where we meet any suggestion of an electing God who, due to the nature of his sovereign power, must decisively and actively damn the many that are not elected for salvation, we find a repetition of the saving Christ/damning God binary. In other words, we arrive at a tension at the heart of the Trinity itself—one in which God’s will would seem to directly oppose the salvific work of Christ. For Calvin, however, we see this problematic—and the structure of his response to it—emerging prior to the topic of salvation which will arrive in book two, precisely because of the more extended consideration he gives to providence and the active relationship of the divine will to the creation more generally.

The pedagogical arrangement of Calvin’s writing—following the distinct works of Father, Son, Spirit alongside the domains of human life—provides him additional resources to potentially assuage the problem of the two wills. So where Luther would tend to resort to the language of inscrutability or mystery, especially when referring to the operations of the divine will outside of the Christological center, Calvin subverts the problem by framing the very universe as chosen by God as the theater of God’s activity. In the words of Randall Zachman,

Unlike Luther, Calvin interprets the clothing of God in terms of the universe the living image of God, in which the invisible God appears in a manner visible to us. “In respect of his essence, God undoubtedly dwells in light that is inaccessible; but as he irradiates the whole world by his splendor, this is the garment in which he, who is hidden in himself, appears in a manner visible to us.” Calvin contrasts the hiddenness of God with the beautiful clothing of the world that we see and accentuates the beauty of that clothing: “That we may enjoy the sight of him, he must come forth to view in his clothing; that is to say, we must cast our eyes upon the very beautiful

⁷⁹ Although predestination and providence are distinct for Calvin, this is largely due to their respective locations in the pedagogical itinerary. In other respects, these doctrinal discussions are repetitions of the same basic problemata. Predestination, which appears in book three on how the grace of Christ is rightly received, is uniquely fit to follow the full discussion of the *cognitio Dei redemptoris* just as providence emerges earlier with the *cognitio Dei creatoris*. For Calvin’s discussion of predestination and election, see *Institutes* 3.21-24.

fabric of the world in which he wishes to be seen by us, and not be too curious and rash in search in his secret essence.”⁸⁰

Following what we have seen of Calvin’s logic of signification and its relationship to creation as well as incarnation (chapter four), this also affirms the sense in which the Word is operative in creation historically prior to the event of incarnation. It also suggests that the horizon of a Christian’s earthly life aims toward gradually seeing God’s presence in relation to the world with increasing clarity—and in a way that is neither apart from the world (access into God’s transcendent essence) nor apart from the world (in a state of fusion or collapse).

The incarnation is therefore a repetition of the special providence that initiated God’s original adoptive relation to materiality, a gesture first enacted through creation itself. According to Julie Canlis,

In his doctrine of creation, Calvin refuses to envision a general relationship between the triune God and humanity.... All creation is related to God in the second person of the Trinity, who mediates creation and its *telos*. All things are created by him, and created for perfect union with him. This arrangement is not due to sin, but to the *en Christo* way that God relates to humanity. He has not structured a universe in which life, grace, and “benefits” can be had apart from [God].⁸¹

Recourse to a theological structure through which the Creator’s original relation to creation is both intimate and perpetual, staging both general commitment and special accommodations, offers Calvin the prospect of widening the scope of Hiddenness I, and thus closing the conceptual space that warrants the discourse around Hiddenness II. In other words, if God’s relation to the whole universe involves the Word and Spirit in ordering and signifying created material life—a signification which, as we will see, becomes available to human beings for Calvin most fundamentally and expansively through

⁸⁰ Randall Zachman, *John Calvin as Pastor, Teacher, and Theologian* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006). Quotes from Calvin’s commentary on Psalm 104 are from CO 32:85A.

⁸¹ Julie Canlis, *Calvin’s Ladder* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 57.

participation in the materiality of the sacraments⁸²—then Calvin is able to argue for a more capacious sense in which God is hidden in general revelation across the expanse of the material world itself.

Still, Calvin must address the problem that God’s relationship to creation ties the causal function of God’s will with the sin that disfigures the beauty and order of the very creation that God has made. At one point, Calvin refers to the “hidden will” of God in language that would strikingly point to the inscrutability of Hiddenness II, writing that the will of God that maintains a fallen creation in excess of the law is rightly viewed as a “deep abyss.”⁸³ He proceeds, however, to point to the activity of the Word and Spirit in creation itself as the mechanism that gradually bestows signification upon even the looming abyss which existed in the perception of the human being—a perception that becomes reoriented and clarified through the persuasion of faith.⁸⁴ Calvin writes:

God illumines the minds of his own with the spirit of discernment for the understanding of these mysteries which he has deigned to reveal by his Word, now no abyss is here: rather a way in which we ought to walk in safety, and a lamp to guide our feet, and the school of sure and clear truth. Yet his wonderful method of governing the universe is rightly called an abyss, because *while it is hidden from us, we ought reverently to adore it.*⁸⁵

⁸² Calvin’s specific and well-developed theory of signification will be discussed in the third section of this chapter. My argument, at this point, is that signification (and coming to participate in the divine signification given to earthly events) characterizes the pedagogical choreography of providence, though this does not become Calvin’s explicit language until book four of the *Institutes*.

⁸³ *Institutes*, 1.17.2.

⁸⁴ One should recall the various images through which Calvin relies on the post-Christological structure even in his focus on God the Creator. For example, the invocation of spectacles, which Calvin deploys earlier in book one to frame the use of scripture in relationship with the structure of the damaged sense of the divine. This was discussed in relationship to the genre of the *enchiridion* in chapter three. This passage also vividly recalls the image of the labyrinth, which we saw later in chapter three is used by Calvin to frame the journey of pedagogy through signification in spatial and temporal, and perhaps even civic terms. Here, we see the repetition of this structure happening specifically within the discourse on providence.

⁸⁵ *Institutes*, 1.17.2. Italics mine. It should be noted, here, that the italicized portions will be echoed by Calvin in his discussion of the Lord’s Supper in book four. I will discuss this later in this chapter.

In his reading of Calvin's view of divine hiddenness, Gerrish rightly notes that alongside this passage the hidden will of God is terrifying *only* in the absence of the Word.⁸⁶ This is not to suggest that fear and anxiety does not remain attached to the experience of the world, but rather that the dread that attends life in the world is no longer narrated (from the human perspective) in terms of a bifurcation in the divine will. Instead, that dread itself is subject to special divine signifying activity—creating and redeeming divine activity—within and by means of the material world. Calvin puts this as follows:

Thus, according to Luke, the whole church says that Herod and Pilate conspired to do what God's hand and plan had decreed. And indeed, unless Christ had been crucified according to God's will, whence would we have redemption? Yet God's will is not therefore at war with itself, nor does it change, nor does it pretend not to will what he wills. But even though his will is one and simple in him, it appears manifold to us because, on account of our mental incapacity, we do not grasp how in diverse ways it wills and does not will something to take place.⁸⁷

The divine will appears unified, therefore, only inasmuch as faith understands that God wills participation in the world so that the world may re-attain participation in the divine. Redemption therefore transpires through the repetition of a primordial will toward creation—a will which, with respect to Christ, appears first as the affirmation of God's initial election of this real and distinct material creation as the site through which and toward which God's will relates as it moves to its desired end.

Calvin's argument against the apparently-split will of God with respect to mundane occurrences returns us to the matter of signification, or the importance of particular acts naming for restructuring the meaningful order of the world more generally. Once we grasp that the relationship between signs and things is disposed by God's signifying activity in relation to mundane things, providence becomes a matter not only of faith that God's signifying activity involves and disposes all things but also of learning how to best to live and act with respect to "things" as disposed by divine signs. Put another way,

⁸⁶ Gerrish, "Hiddenness," 283.

⁸⁷ *Institutes* 1.18.3.

learning to understand providence correctly means learning to apprehend and follow the Trinitarian God's relation to God's earthly garment. In this vein, it is instructive to recall Augustine's theory of signs (chapter four) and consider how it may help us to grasp the workings of providence in Calvin's view.⁸⁸ For Augustine, God secures the hierarchical relationship between signs and things through the activity of creation and particularly through the incarnate Word. In a related but not identical way, Calvin is arguing that through the *special* providential actions of creation and incarnation, where God assumes particular relationships to creation by performing the name of Godself as creator and human being respectively, God secures the pattern of activity through which the providential will *generally* affirms material conditions and the reality of immanent causes. Put in other terms, a particular narrative anchors a pattern for understanding a more general narrative.

This does not mean, of course, that human beings necessarily will the divine will. When human beings will, the will is moved by its desire for a certain outcome; it points through something to an end beyond that thing, similar to the way signs operate through intermediaries to point to their signified. By reason of God's creative activity and the ongoing providential will that operates in relation to mediate wills and related or natural causal chains, the human will therefore contributes either unwittingly or piously toward the constitution of the providential order as a whole. Intermediary wills and causes cannot help *but* signify, but as finite they do not and cannot control the ultimate end of their signifying action. When a believer wills in accordance with the divine will through grace, she enjoys the benefits of assuming her appropriate place within the hierarchical relationship of wills. Just as for Augustine's student, progress in Christian teaching means learning to assume one's place in the hierarchy of signs—

⁸⁸ Some have noted the influence of *De Doctrina Christiana* on Calvin, but have usually limited it to the matter of hermeneutics. See E. David Willis, "Rhetoric and Responsibility in Calvin's Theology," in Alexander J. McKelway and E. David Willis, eds., *The Context of Contemporary Theology: Essays in Honor of Paul Lehmann* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1974); and David F. Wright, "Calvin's Accommodating God," in W.H. Neuser and B.G. Armstrong, eds., *Calvinus Sincerioris Religionis Vindex* (Kirkville: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1997). One brief yet helpful essay that does discuss *DDC* in relation to Calvin's view of signs is G.R. Evans, "Calvin on Signs: An Augustinian Dilemma," *Renaissance Studies* 3 (1989): 35-45.

to receive signification, and participate in granting proper signification—Calvin’s doctrine of providence asks a believer to trust in the overarching arc of the divine will in order to learn to better receive and react to finite events. Thus, the Christian who has come to know God the creator *as* provident learns to desire and thus to will in a certain way that is deliberately deployed in relation to the desire and will of God.⁸⁹

This also clarifies the distinction Calvin will proceed to draw between God’s will and “precept” (or law)—which, as we have seen, initially points to the suggestion of a cleft will on the part of God to an untrained human mind. But if God’s active will constitutes a partial cause of immanent events insofar as it affirms and then guides those events toward God’s desired ends, God’s precept offers signs that not only clarify the optimal orientation toward mundane life, but which also point toward the ultimate end to which even obscure and troubling events ultimately point. Calvin’s commitment to this positive, signifying function of the revealed law comes into view in book two, the portion of the *Institutes* concerned with the God the Redeemer “first disclosed to the fathers under the law, and then to us in the gospel.”⁹⁰ There, we see the visible anchor for signification appearing historically prior to the incarnation, speaking to the activity of the Word not only in creation itself but in the special providence of the law. The law is moreover given a positive function with respect to the existence and maintenance of immanent creation.

When Calvin introduces the law, he first follows the familiar Lutheran uses of the law to (1) reveal the nature and extent of sin and to (2) function as a deterrent or “bridle” for the common good.⁹¹ Providence, similarly, operates to (1) assert God’s ongoing activity even in a world that appears marked

⁸⁹ As already noted, for more on the relational re-orientation of ontology characteristic to the Reformers, see Oberman, “The Pursuit of Happiness,” 265-ff. See also Canlis, 71-73, 127.

⁹⁰ See *Institutes* 2.1.1.

⁹¹ See *Institutes*, 2.7.1-9 (especially 3), and 2.7.10-11.

by chaos, and (2) to limit and guide mundane events from destroying the venue for human life. These two are structurally similar insofar as (1) has to do with the ongoing state of post-lapsarian creation, and God's negative (limiting) relation to that creation. Ultimately, however, Calvin discloses a third and "principal" use of the law that interacts particularly with believers through grace to teach and confirm precisely the aim of God's will with respect to created life. The logic of this third use follows the logic we have glimpsed thus far: it is one in which the special precedes the general, and one through which God's hiddenness ultimately affirms the existence of creation itself. Calvin writes that the law contains a "promise," and this third function of the law is to point in a positive way toward the content of that promise—namely, that humans may "learn more thoroughly each day the nature of the Lord's will to which they aspire, and to confirm them in the understanding of it."⁹² The law, then, reiterates the function of spectacles to clarify and facilitate participation in the order of creation. The physical incarnation of Christ will further repeat and secure the relationship between the signification of the will and the efficient causes through which that will achieves its end—thus more concretely *enabling* a form of choreographed participation of the believer as an embodied person living in the material creation. We can begin to see more clearly, then, the way in which this thread of continuing spheres of re-naming guides a reader through the layers of the *Institutes*—an argument I began in chapter three and that will ultimately take us through the sacraments to the city.

But first, let us finally consider more fully the second question related to the precise operations of the *voluntas Dei* in relation to the world, namely *how* the divine will relates to the immanent world. If signification is enacted and granted by the divine will and the various signifying accommodations that God provides, such as the incarnation and scripture, what does this say about the material things that become signs as a result of these accommodations, or which take on signification? Does God will in

⁹² *Institutes*, 2.7.12.

spite of them, through them, or apart from them? This question of the precise relationship of the divine will to the immanent world has to do with the way—or the even the ethical orientation through which—God’s will *uses* materially-existing *things*. As we have seen, Calvin could not be clearer that he understands God’s will to be unified as it guides, supports, and sanctions the other range of wills and causes that account for worldly occurrences. He likewise insists upon God’s active disposition in providence, not only the sense that it engages relationally with other wills and causes but in that this engagement is active rather than permissive.⁹³ Toward the end of the final chapter of book one Calvin states the implications of this position with a provocative, and perhaps disturbing calmness: “I have already shown plainly enough that God is called the Author of all the things that these faultfinders would have happen only by his indolent permission. He declares that he creates light and darkness, that he forms good and bad; that nothing evil happens that he himself has not done.”⁹⁴ This claim, biblical as it is (see Isaiah 45:7, Amos 3:6), would seem to throw us back into the forest of Hiddenness II were it not for the key distinction we must maintain in Calvin’s thought between will and cause. Inasmuch as God *wills* all things with a will that is moved—and actively moves the world—toward the end of justice and goodness, God *causes* evil and suffering. That is, God continues to affirm conditions in and through which suffering and evil are caused.

But why does God’s goodness not lead God to simply override or disregard the reality of other causes? It is in response to this question that the affirming quality of the divine will with respect to the reality of the immanent world comes into focus. Observe how Calvin draws his argument to a conclusion, inclined once again to speak in part through the words of Augustine:

⁹³ Mere permission would suggest a relation to materiality that is parallel to materiality, in which the divine will furnishes options in addition to materiality but not through materiality itself.

⁹⁴ *Institutes* 1.18.3.

All the wicked, from their point of view, had done what God did not will, but from the point of view of God's omnipotence they could in no way have done this, because while they act against God's will, his will is done upon them. Whence [Augustine] exclaims: "Great are God's works, sought out in all his wills. In a wonderful and ineffable manner *nothing is done without God's will, not even that which is against his will*. For it would not be done if he did not permit it; yet he does not unwillingly permit it, but willingly; nor would he, being good, allow evil to be done, unless being also almighty he could make good even out of evil."⁹⁵

Here, it may be possible to ascertain the conceptual and practical payoff of maintaining these various distinctions between Creator and the distinct reality of creation, the respective activities of will and cause, and the differing functions of divine will and divine precept. That is, when confronted with the suggestion of a God who wills against God's own will, it is possible to parse the mechanics through which this otherwise riddle-like movement of the will is legible. God's will is involved in even those things that are against God's will inasmuch as God's will first and foremost affirms the initial creation alongside the relative reality and worth of intermediaries—both wills and causes—as goods in and of themselves. This created reality does not prohibit God from continuing to realize the aims of God's good will; but the world's ongoing and distinct existence points to a certain primary movement of the divine will *as* affirmation—as a movement that encourages the existence of this alterity as a prior condition for any relationship.

In other words, Calvin suggests in the conclusion of his argument that providence ultimately signifies God's dedication to created materiality *as* the elected site for God's glory to shine. Whenever God "wills" evil or suffering, God is more fundamentally affirming really-existing immanent structures and desires in view of a goodness that desires a relation to creation. Because the distinction between Creator and creation invariably remains, this affirmative quality implied in providence does not impede the suggestion of a meaning for the world beyond the world, or even of a destination for human souls beyond death. God is free to direct aims where God wills—and ultimately back to the divine source

⁹⁵ *Institutes*, 1.18.3. Emphasis mine. For the source of the Augustine quotation, see *Enchiridion* 26.100-01.

itself. Calvin thus speaks of things such as eternal life or heaven without inconsistency. Furthermore, this distinction implies that Calvin's view of providence does not have to do with ontological necessity. Part of affirming something that is, strictly speaking, other than oneself, is affirming the structural independence—not only operations, causes and effects, but emotions, creativity, and desires. In this respect, God's will is conceptually delinked from natural necessity.

This underscores the basis for the divergence from Stoic approaches to providence signaled by Calvin himself. Yet while such an emphasis is perhaps more representative of the typically Christian distinction between eternal Creator and temporal creation, Calvin's deep suspicion of ontological or even vestigial continuity contributes to the relative novelty of his view with respect to the Christian tradition. With his strict separation between God and the world mediated only by the activity of relationship across difference through signification,⁹⁶ Calvin is often seen to be asserting the complete freedom of God, or resisting the so-called "medieval domestication" of God that occurred through the closer, naturalized association between God and orders of life.⁹⁷ The upshot of emphasizing God's distance, however, is that Calvin emphasizes the according distance and causal integrity of the world as distinct from God. This not only creates the conditions for a different kind of participation, it also creates the conditions for a new kind of interest in the world on its own.⁹⁸ And, following from this, it finally creates the conditions for a distinct form of Christian ethics that is at least potentially interested

⁹⁶ While I will fill out this claim in the last part of this chapter, I hope it is clear at this point that the forms of mediation Calvin lifts up—election, scripture, incarnation—are precisely mediations that rely on signification to create their relationship of difference.

⁹⁷ Canlis, 66-70. It should be emphasized that a diversity of views existed in medieval thought—a diversity underscored by the rise of nominalism in the twelfth-fourteenth centuries.

⁹⁸ Much has been written in recent years on the impact of nominalism on both the Reformation and then on modernity. Most strongly associated with the work of William of Ockham, nominalism is a late medieval critique of real universals which posits instead the existence of only particulars and a God who rules by omnipotent will alone. In addition to Heiko Oberman's classic work on the topic in *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Beil and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), see Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

in divinely-patterned methods for relating across difference. With the doctrine of providence, we see that affirmation is an early and key step in establishing such a relation.⁹⁹

Interestingly, however, the world-affirming character of the providential will suggests that God's ongoing creative activity treats the world with a kind of perpetuity that is, from the perspective of a human being in the world, more reminiscent of classical approaches to providence than Christian ones. Created materiality is not merely a temporary vale of tears on the path to the eternal rest of the soul in God; creation is rather the eternally—and from our perspective continually—chosen site of God's relational activity.¹⁰⁰ And it is this decision—this election—that best encapsulates the force of the divine *decretum*. When Calvin speaks of God's degree or judgment—as a more generalized decision concerning the order of the universe and historical events—this indeed attaches itself to a notion of inevitability. God's decree is the overall decision—sealed in eternity—to choose and creatively re-affirm the immanent world and to actively take divine responsibility for all that this will entail. Grasping the affirmative movement of the providential will thus lends increased legibility to passages in which Calvin attempts to refute “profane” attempts to relieve human life of responsibility due to some notion of the “fixed decrees” of God. Against such claims, Calvin argues explicitly that such a view would “mingle heaven and earth.”¹⁰¹ God's decree, rather, represents God's decision to affirm and then work within

⁹⁹ My reasoning here agrees with much of Canlis's argument for a traditional yet novel form of relational participation that drives Calvin's theology. Canlis argues that the distance between God and creation precedes the “communion” that God invariably seeks. My argument, focused on the role of providence, adds the sense in which radical affirmation is an important ethical move in establishing any possibility for the kind of communion fostered by the Spirit. This is not to suggest a general sacramentality, however, any more than the Spirit can be separated from the Creator and Redeemer in Calvin's thought. The sacraments establish a pattern through which God's true relation to the wider creation can be pursued, but the particularity of the sacraments is always central to this practice.

¹⁰⁰ In a metaphysical sense, Calvin agrees with someone like Boethius that providence operates from eternity, or from a radically other temporal location vis-à-vis creation. Calvin, however, emphasizes the temporality of the incarnation through which a holistically affirming will becomes legibly a temporally affirming will. I will discuss this more—especially in relation to the suffering of Christ—later in this chapter.

¹⁰¹ *Institutes* 1.17.3.

the scope of real circumstances and real human decisions: “This means that we are not at all hindered by God’s eternal decrees either from looking ahead for ourselves or from putting all our affairs in order, but always in submission to his will. The reason is obvious. For he who has set the limits to our life has at the same time entrusted us to its care.”¹⁰² This understanding of *decretum* in relation to both *voluntas Dei* and *causas inferiores* thus establishes a horizon not only for participation, but for a certain kind of participation in which human cultivation in Christian teaching means learning to affirm (and obey) the *divine* will.

This pattern is visible in a number of later sites across the *Institutes*’ itinerary. One particularly illuminative location is found in book three. There, in a discussion of Christian self-cultivation of the affections, Calvin fleshes out the purchase of his critique of Stoicism, providing us with a practical difference between the will’s affirmation of the world and the will’s submission to the world as the site of necessity. Discussing the proper Christian response in particular to suffering, Calvin writes as follows:

It is not as the Stoics of old foolishly described “the great-souled man”: one who, having cast off all human qualities, was affected equally by adversity and prosperity, by sad times and happy ones—nay, who like a stone was not affected at all.... We have nothing to do with this iron philosophy which our Lord and Master has condemned not only by his word, but also by his example. For he groaned and wept both over his own and others’ misfortunes. And he taught his disciples in the same way: “The world,” he says, “will rejoice; but you will be sorrowful and will weep.” And that no one might turn it into a vice, he openly proclaimed, “Blessed are those who mourn.” No wonder! For if all weeping is condemned, what shall we judge concerning the Lord himself, from whose body tears of blood trickled down? If all fear is branded as unbelief, how shall we account for that dread with which, we read, he was heavily stricken? If all sadness displeases us, how will it please us that he confesses his soul “sorrowful even to death”?¹⁰³

¹⁰² *Institutes* 1.17.4.

¹⁰³ *Institutes*, 3.8.9. Contrast this, for example, with the following passage from Epictetus’ *Enchiridion*:

Whenever you see someone in tears, distraught because they are parted from a child, or have met with some material loss, be careful lest the impression move you to believe that their circumstances are truly bad. Have ready the reflection that they are not upset by what happened – because other people are not upset when the same thing happens to them – but by their own view of the matter. Nevertheless, you should not disdain to sympathize with them, at least with comforting words, or even to the extent of sharing outwardly in their grief. But do not commiserate with your whole heart and soul (Epictetus, 227).

In the passages that follow this one, Calvin's interest in preserving the full range of human emotions has the effect of affirming not only the reality of conditions involving loss and suffering, but the reality of natural human affective responses *to* loss and suffering. In addition, Calvin's argument follows the pattern of the special activity leading to general activity. That is, the divine activity of Christ also establishes the grounds *for* a kind of affective exercise on the part of the suffering believer, one involving a practiced participation in the responsive pattern of Christ to suffering:

This, therefore, we must try to do if we would be disciples of Christ, in order that our minds may be steeped in such reverence and obedience toward God as to be able to tame and subjugate to his command all contrary affections. Thus it will come to pass that, by whatever kind of cross we may be troubled, even in the greatest tribulations of mind, we shall firmly keep our patience. For the adversities themselves will have their own bitterness to gnaw at us; thus afflicted by disease, we shall both groan and be uneasy and pant after health... thus at the funerals of our dear ones we shall weep the tears that are owed to our nature. But the conclusion will always be: the Lord so willed, therefore let us follow his will. Indeed, amid the very pricks of pain, amid groaning and tears, this thought must intervene: to incline our heart to bear cheerfully those things which have so moved it.¹⁰⁴

In these passages, Calvin describes a Christian posture toward the inevitability of immanent suffering that is exercised not merely through resignation or forbearance but through the active affirmation of the divine will as a good in itself. The affirmation of the divine will is not the affirmation of the mere circumstances; to hold this would be to confuse will and cause. The affirmation of the divine will is rather the affirmation of faith in a scheme in which "complying with providence" undergirds "the preservation of life itself,"¹⁰⁵ as attested by a God who "could make good even out of evil."¹⁰⁶

These features of Calvin's later argument concerning the explicitly embodied role of Christ the Redeemer aid us in appreciating the way the life, death, and resurrection of Christ concretize the more

¹⁰⁴ *Institutes*, 3.8.10.

¹⁰⁵ *Institutes*, 1.17.4.

¹⁰⁶ *Institutes*, 1.18.3.

basic movements of providence—affirming of material life, bearing the full weight of suffering without mitigation, submitting even to death, and realizing the extension of the special activity of God’s will beyond even death in the resurrection. This biblical narrative of the life of Jesus Christ, however, does not end with the resurrection; rather, Calvin is very aware that Christ departs from the mundane sphere by means of an ascension. Furthermore, it is by means of the physical absence of the special providence of Christ the Redeemer that the Spirit descends and dwells on earth to constitute the more diffuse “body” of Christ in the Church. The outline of this, too, is choreographed in book one’s discussion of providence: namely, in that “[providence] strives to the end that God may reveal his concern for the whole human race, but especially his vigilance in ruling the church, which he deigns to watch more closely.”¹⁰⁷ The pattern of special to general therefore obtains one last time: the Spirit that shapes the church gives way to revealing God’s concern for the whole human race. And, perhaps most crucially, we see a role constructed for the church as the site of Christian formation that follows after, and moreover *repeats*, the initial special-then-generalized context of creation itself.

In the last section of this chapter, I will look at these last two layers of the pattern of the doctrine of providence, which we have now seen constructs a pattern of activity and affirmation that moves from special act to general re-naming, and thus from gift to responsive activity—of participation and sometimes resistance—on the part of the human. In book one, we are given the most general contours that establish God’s dedicated relationship to the material world and the most general human response to affirm the mundane world and its inevitabilities with sorrow, cheerfulness, and obedience. In what follows, I will look at the subsequent Trinitarian layers, first at the incarnation and the diffusive covenant of adoption, then at the church and the diffusive practices of Word and sacrament. My interest will be to see how the basic movements of providence remain in a much more concretized

¹⁰⁷ *Institutes*, 1.17.1.

form, and particularly how providence invites a practice of resignification that fully obtains in the sacramental practices of the church.

III. Calvin's Doctrine of Providence as the Basis for Practices of Sacrament and Citizenship

As we move from providence to topics found later in the *Institutes*, we follow the tracks of a third pattern that emerges from the argumentative shape of the text in addition to the linear *itinerarium* and the repetitive method of teaching that connects knowledge to use and fruitfulness. This third pattern is, I have argued, anchored in the content of doctrine itself, beginning with the doctrine of providence (thus the doctrine of creation); this can be summarized as a practice of receiving and re-performing sacramental signs between heaven and earth. My interest in this final section is to flesh out the relationship I have been constructing between providence as immanent affirmation and providence as a practice of re-naming on the part of believers. The basic philosophical affinity between these two ways of understanding the movement of the providence is evident: understanding Christian pedagogy as an exercise of differentiation and re-naming requires one to affirm the existence of signs and signifying things while also recognizing that signs and signifying things may be disposed differently in order to signify differently. The providential will of God, which is directed through signs toward ends, thus both (a) affirms the bearer of signification and (b) points through it toward other signs and ultimately to things. There is therefore a performative quality to this activity: when signs are read a certain way, a relationship between the thing and that to which it points is enacted or given meaning through the form of life that is now enabled.

Here, I want to draw this reading of Calvin to a close by giving attention to two areas. I am interested, ultimately, in the particular forms of ethical practice enabled more strictly with respect to the general domain of providence, having to do with the order of immanent life and the natural world and the attendant inevitabilities of suffering and death. But to better grasp these ethical implications, I

am interested in surveying how this pattern repeats itself in the other layers of the *Institutes*, and particularly the discussion of sacramental signification that precedes the conclusion of the text in the earthly city. Clearly, tracing the pattern of signification and affirmation that structures the movement from special to general providence as it informs other aspects of Calvin's teaching could be a task for an entire study or several. For now, I will focus on the key sites that particularly illumine the doctrine of providence, and thus our larger questions around the relationship of Calvin's doctrine of providence to practice, citizenship, and the formations of modernity.

a. The Signification of the Mediator and Spirit: Christ, the Covenant of Adoption, and Prayer

We have seen, now repeatedly, that much of Calvin's narrative persuasion relies upon the believer's original misperception and mis-cognition of God as an enemy, and that Calvin seeks to persuade and reform perception and cognition such that one can understand God as a Father. This pattern appears vividly in the Eucharistic framework Calvin animates across the text, in the refiguration of the imagery of the labyrinth, and fundamentally in the relationship between the knowledge of God and ourselves. As a Christian learns more about God, she learns more about herself. And at the end of book one, we see that as the relationship of God to the world is re-signified, the relationship of the self to God is likewise re-signified—it actually becomes re-created. This is the practical payoff of providence: namely, that one will “not doubt that it is the Lord's blessing alone by which all things prosper” and “will not continue to be ungrateful,” while at the same time maintaining hope amidst adversity, knowing that the “Heavenly Father so holds all things in his power, so rules by his authority and will, so governs by his wisdom, that nothing can befall except he determine it.”¹⁰⁸ The providential God is the God whose

¹⁰⁸ *Institutes*, 1.17.7, 8, 11.

special activity evacuates fear and dread in place of “patience and peaceful moderation of mind”—a God whose power meets faith most fundamentally in the character of loving Father.¹⁰⁹

We are now prepared to return to a key passage in book two and better grasp the way the *duplex cognitio Dei* relies upon a layered pattern that first obtains in providence. Observe, once more, the arc from creation to redemption as one driven by the needs of an accommodated pedagogy:

The natural order was that the frame of the universe should be the school in which we were to learn piety, and from it pass over to eternal life and perfect felicity. But after humankind’s rebellion, our eyes—wherever they turn—encounter God’s curse. This curse, while it seizes and envelops innocent creatures through our fault, must overwhelm our souls with despair. For even if God wills to manifest his fatherly favor to us in many ways, yet we cannot by contemplating the universe infer that he is Father. Rather, conscience presses us within and shows in our sin just cause for his disowning us and not regarding or recognizing us as his sons. Dullness and ingratitude follow, for our minds, as they have been blinded, do not perceive what is true. And as all our senses have become perverted, we wickedly defraud God of his glory.¹¹⁰

Calvin’s language would seem entirely inconsistent regarding the nature of God were it not for our grasp of the dialectical threshold he has consistently established as the site of Christian teaching. Knowledge of God meets human beings in the act, not in some notion of an essence behind the act;¹¹¹ therefore the

¹⁰⁹ Father-language, as we have already seen, is a striking and pervasive feature of Calvin’s theology, contributing a range of indications to Calvin’s already-mixed record on matters of gender and family. On the one hand, Calvin’s reliance upon the analogy between God and fatherhood consistently constructs a loving, caring, attentive and generous father—one who insists upon a familiar title and adopts strangers into his family. Furthermore, in his commentaries, Calvin did not show any discomfort in analogizing God’s love equally to a mother’s love (CO 37:204C). On the other hand, one is well advised to critically consider the larger effects not only of overwhelmingly associating God with a sexed and gendered office, but also the relationship between this theological imagery and the early modern turn (especially in Reformed circles) to vesting the patriarchal family with a certain religious authority. The affirmation of family life was a common feature of reformers’ critique of the medieval religious life, and the repercussions of this are still apparent in contemporary politics of religion and family. To what extent does Calvin link the father’s love with the father’s rule? And what kind of rule is exemplified in the actions of the economic Trinity with reference to the world and human life? These are important questions to keep in mind, even as one appreciates the rhetorical effects of Calvin’s father language. Additionally, for recent work on Calvin’s relationship to women theologically and historically, see John Lee Thompson, *John Calvin and the Daughters of Sarah: Women in Regular and Exceptional Roles in the Exegesis of Calvin, His Predecessors, and His Contemporaries* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1992).

¹¹⁰ *Institutes*, 2.6.1.

¹¹¹ This dovetails with the discussion of hiddenness above and particularly Randall Zachman’s discussion (see footnote 70), as well as Calvin’s discussion of the knowledge of God which I examined more closely in chapter four:

ongoing gracious activity of God acts to materially reform perception and cognition with respect to the nature of the reality in and through which God works. Keeping this in mind, we can make sense of the simultaneous claim that God's activity is received as a curse while God yet "wills to manifest his fatherly favor." As I argued above concerning God's providential will, the perceived phenomenon of the refracted divine will does not reflect the divine will itself, but rather the disordered human senses that perceive that will.¹¹²

In book two, we find the divine remedy for this malady to be explicitly Christological; however, the remedy retains the basic structure of affirmation and re-signification while constituting a more concrete field—a special providence, if you will—for human participation. Calvin continues as follows:

We must, for this reason, come to Paul's statement: "Since in the wisdom of God the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of preaching to save those who believe." This magnificent theater of heaven and earth, crammed with innumerable miracles, Paul calls the "wisdom of God." Contemplating it, we ought in wisdom to have known God. But because we have profited so little by it, he calls us to the *faith of Christ*, which, because it appears foolish, the unbelievers despise. Therefore, although the preaching of the cross does not agree with our human inclination, if we desire to return to God our Author and Maker, from whom we have been estranged, in order that he may again begin to be our Father, we ought nevertheless to embrace it humbly.¹¹³

We must therefore be much more profoundly affected [*affici*] by this knowledge [*cognitione*] than if we were to imagine a God of whom no perception [*sensus*] came through to us. Consequently, we know the most perfect way of seeking God and the most suitable order, is not for us to attempt with bold curiosity to penetrate to the investigation of his essence, which we ought more to adore than meticulously to search out, but for us to contemplate him in his works, whereby he renders himself near and familiar to us, and in some manner communicates [*comunicat*] himself.... It is also fitting, therefore, for us to pursue this particular search for God, which may so hold our mental powers suspended in wonderment as at the same time to stir us deeply. And as Augustine teaches elsewhere, because, disheartened by his greatness, we cannot grasp him, we ought to gaze upon his works, that we may be restored by his goodness (*Institutes* 1.5.9).

¹¹² See, again, *Institutes* 1.17.4.

¹¹³ *Institutes*, emphasis mine.

The special providence supplied by the preaching of the gospel, or the sacramental words that point to and proclaim the embodied Word, therefore advances the basic scheme through which human beings may become one in Christ, or united as children of the Father. In a more subtle and allusive sense, we also see the affirmation of the material world re-performed in the faith of Christ. For when Calvin refers to the Wisdom of God, he explicitly reiterates a name for the pre-incarnate Word, the Mediator, or the Son: "'Word' means everlasting Wisdom, residing with God, from which both all oracles and prophecies go forth.... [Solomon] introduces wisdom as having been begotten of God before time, and presiding over the creation of things."¹¹⁴ If the wisdom that orders and undergirds the heaven and earth as the theater of God's work and glory is providential, then the wisdom that becomes *incarnate* and suffers in order to further anchor that mediation with the world and specially enact God's work and glory there is likewise providential.

To properly grasp the practices that connect the Word to human being and ultimately to the Church, it will be advantageous to follow through on several concepts that emerge from this passage: specifically, the invocation of the "faith of Christ," and the exhortation to "embrace" that faith. This draws us ahead into book three, the book concerned with "the way in which we receive the grace of Christ,"¹¹⁵ where Calvin turns to the role of the Spirit in stitching the lives of believers together in and through the mediation of Christ. One place is found in Calvin's presentation of justification by faith, where he expands upon the way Christ's divine humanity may become a site of participation for the believer. There—as the phrase "faith of Christ" from the above passage foreshadows—we see that faith

¹¹⁴ *Institutes*, 1.13.7. See also 4.8.7: "But when the Wisdom of God was at length revealed in the flesh, that Wisdom heartily declared to us all that can be comprehended and ought to be pondered concerning the Heavenly Father by the human mind."

¹¹⁵ The full title of book three is "The Way in Which we Receive the Grace of Christ: What Benefits Come to Us From It, and What Effects Follow." It is interesting that Calvin does not explicitly personify the Spirit in book three as he did the Creator and Redeemer in book two. Perhaps this is because the Spirit is always known in the grace that is given to the believer, and therefore in the narrative of the believer's life rather than a separate narrative of what God has done apart from the believer's involvement.

is fundamentally a central work of *God* which is manifest in the responsive and participatory action of the believer. It is a quintessential work of providence, moreover, in that Christ not only clothes his activity in a human body but becomes united with that body: “He set the Son of God familiarly among us as one of ourselves... the Spirit calls him ‘man,’ thus teaching us that he is near us, indeed touches us, since he is our flesh.”¹¹⁶ This constitutes the possibility for the response on the part of the human to, in turn, participate in the providentially-choreographed activity of taking on the clothing of Christ: “Justified by faith is one who, excluded from the righteousness of works, grasps the justice of Christ through faith, and clothed in it, appears in God’s sight not as a sinner but as a just person.”¹¹⁷ And, furthermore, it sets faith squarely within the Eucharistic structure of gift and thanksgiving: “Christ was given to us by God’s generosity, to be grasped and possessed by us in faith.”¹¹⁸

In this sense, not only is faith fundamentally relational—figuring the very call and response pattern through which relationship is performed—it also re-performs the providential call and response of the active divine will (that wills against its own will in relation to the continuance of the world) and the participatory response of the pious will (that wills God’s apparently-hidden will over and against its own will).¹¹⁹ In this scheme there is not only an activity of belief or credence on the part of the believer toward God, but there is a much deeper role for participation through learning to correctly name God’s proper relationship with respect to creation—to *know* (and learn to perceive) God as the source of a goodness that creates and continues to preserve creation and determine good ends for creation. The believer does not merely assent to or project faith in God as the proper object of belief, but actually

¹¹⁶ *Institutes* 2.12.1.

¹¹⁷ *Institutes*, 3.11.2.

¹¹⁸ *Institutes*, 3.11.2.

¹¹⁹ Elsewhere, Calvin writes that faith rests on knowledge of the divine will, of its quality and of what moves it—“because we know God is our merciful Father” (*Institutes* 3.2.2).

becomes reoriented in relation to a larger scheme of signification through which the faith of Christ is “grasped” and its resignification performed *through* the activity of the Christian life.¹²⁰ While this clearly elicits and involves the activity of the believer, the structure in which the believer participates is first created, enacted, and inhabited by God. That structure becomes one of participation when the believer has not lost herself in it, but learned to see herself and perform herself within it.¹²¹

Calvin’s subsequent discussion of prayer—one of the longest chapters of the *Institutes*—illustrates the extent to which this structure of participation invites and relies upon deliberate bodily practices. Furthermore, Calvin connects these practices not only to the active exercise of faith, but explicitly to providence,¹²² following many of the themes we have gathered thus far: the intertwined relation of the divine and the human that constitutes the possibility of knowledge and piety; the theological pattern of gift and response that materially constitutes the possibility for a cognitive relationship; the movement from the experience of bifurcating hiddenness (Hiddenness II) to relational hiddenness (Hiddenness I); and the aim of practiced re-signification. Calvin introduces prayer as the movement that takes a person outside of the self to attain what is needed for the proper constitution of the self; as access to a “secret and hidden philosophy” which may not be ascertained except through the heart [*cor*] in the divine light;¹²³ and as the response to the invitation of God to see God *as* Father and as the source and end of goodness. According to Calvin, “Just as faith is born from the gospel, so through it

¹²⁰ This is similar to how Partee describes the activity of faith for Calvin in *The Theology of John Calvin* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008): “We make God’s promises ours by inwardly embracing them” (86). This statement, however, underemphasizes the extent to which this involves activity on the part of the believer.

¹²¹ Canlis’ *Calvin’s Ladder* and J. Todd Billings’ *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) have provided extended studies into Calvin’s understanding of participation alongside and against its different understandings within Greek and Christian thought. For a helpful discussion of the varieties of participation and what is at stake in their differences, see Canlis’ first chapter, “Ladders of Ascent: A Brief History.”

¹²² See 3.20.2-3.

¹²³ One can note the thread of references, not least in Calvin’s discussion of providence, to the light emanating from the divine Word that exists temporally and ontologically prior to created light. See, for example, *Institutes* 1.6.1 and 1.13.13.

our hearts are trained to call upon God's name."¹²⁴ Additionally, just as Calvin describes God's providential activity through a range of terms that emphasize the multiple and personal ways through which God engages material life, Calvin describes the activity of prayer as an active and repetitive form of naming and re-naming the relationships between God and the world that does not merely hope, but lays claim upon the horizon of Christian teaching for the purposes of engaging in a certain kind of life. The "training of the heart" through prayer is described, in the first three sections alone, with the following language: as raising up of our spirits, stirring up of unspeakable groanings, reaching for (heavenly) riches, appealing to God's promises so as to order one's own experience, digging up treasures, gazing upon treasures, the firing up of "burning desires" in the heart, preparation for receiving benefits, embracing with delight, activating defense and help, and—multiple times—the "exercise of faith."¹²⁵

In fact, Calvin repeatedly returns in particular to the language of desire and of exercise or training throughout the lengthy chapter, recalling the double movement of affirmation and cultivation with regard to the emotions that we saw at the end of the previous section. Prayer, in fact, emerges from the highest affirmation of what is understood to be most utterly real and the relating of that to the power and goodness promised by God. Calvin writes that in our petitions we ought to "earnestly ponder how we need all that we seek, [and] join this prayer with an earnest—nay burning—desire to attain it." Eschewing any sense of prayer that is perfunctory rather than deeply felt, he adds that "the godly must particularly beware of presenting themselves before God to request anything unless they yearn for it with sincere affection of heart, and at the same time desire to obtain it from him."¹²⁶ Calvin routinely adds to this desire the need for its discipline and direction, while never suggesting its

¹²⁴ *Institutes*, 3.20.1.

¹²⁵ See *Institutes* 3.20.1-3.

¹²⁶ *Institutes*, 3.20.6.

cessation. Lawful prayer, for example, requires repentance,¹²⁷ preparation,¹²⁸ and most clearly the guidance supplied by the concrete structure of faith.¹²⁹ And, if it were not clear by implication, Calvin understands both this desire and this training to involve the gestures of the body, writing:

For even though the best prayers are sometimes unspoken, it often happens in practice that, when feelings of mind are aroused, unostentatiously the tongue breaks forth into speech, and the other members gesture. From this obviously arose that uncertain murmur of Hannah's, something similar to which all the saints continually experience when they burst forth into broken and fragmentary speech. As for the bodily gestures customarily observed in praying, such as kneeling and uncovering the head, they are exercises whereby we try to rise to a greater reverence for God.¹³⁰

It is significant to note the pattern of the relation depicted here between words and bodies—a pattern we will soon see reiterated in Calvin's understanding of sacramental practice. Within the structure of prayer, real need gives birth to desire, which only then gives birth to words; those words then enter into a framework of disciplined bodily movement that functions to further dispose them.¹³¹

Furthermore, Calvin's discussion of prayer represents a key site where the promised "benefits" of the pursuit of the knowledge of God and self are properly realized at the level of experience and activity. Tellingly, this often appears explicitly under the aegis of providence, underscoring the importance of providence as the aim [*scopus*] of book one and as layered under the aim of the *Institutes* as a whole. According to Calvin,

¹²⁷ *Institutes*, 3.20.7.

¹²⁸ *Institutes*, 3.20.9.

¹²⁹ *Institutes*, 3.20.11. It is not hard to discern, here, the reappearance of Augustine's two rules of faith and love.

¹³⁰ *Institutes*, 3.20.33.

¹³¹ At another point, Calvin calls for a certain form of detachment in order to assume the posture of one in conversation with God. Even there, however, he writes that the "great anxiety" tied to carnal concerns ought not to be suppressed, but ought rather "to kindle in us the desire to pray" (*Institutes* 3.20.4).

Words fail to explain how necessary prayer is, and in how many ways the exercise of prayer is profitable.... By doing so we invoke the presence both of his providence, through which he watches over [*advigilet*] and guards [*curandis*] our affairs [*rebus*], and of his power, through which he sustains us, weak as we are and well-nigh overcome, and of his goodness, through which he receives us, miserably burdened with sins, unto grace; and, in short, it is by prayer that we call him to reveal himself as wholly present to us.¹³²

Here, we can see the continued threads of a re-naming performed through the proper invocation of God as the source: the ascription of goodness to God, the plea for God's continued presence, and the affirmation of providence as the sustenance of life itself. He soon adds, using terms familiar to his understanding of Christian pedagogy, that "the use and experience [of prayer] may, according to the measure of our feebleness, confirm his providence."¹³³ And finally, prayer confirms the implication that providence is itself a doctrine that emerges from and invites *human* activity. Calvin writes, "'For the eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, and his ears toward their prayers.' This sentence so commends the providence of God—intent of his own accord upon caring for the salvation of the godly—as yet *not to omit the exercise of faith, by which human minds are cleansed of indolence*."¹³⁴ Not only do these repeated connections underscore the continuity of the patterned practice of providence across the text as a whole, they further emphasize that Calvin understands providence to be a participatory enterprise. Just as his understanding of God's providence denies any perceived "indolence" on the part of God, his understanding of prayer in relation to providence denies indolence in human activity.¹³⁵

Finally, the discussion of prayer also begins to flesh out the Trinitarian structure that we have already seen plays an important, if largely implicit, role in providence. If Christology anchors the faith that is activated in the life of the individual Christian, then pneumatology anchors the participation of

¹³² *Institutes*, 3.20.2.

¹³³ *Institutes*, 3.20.3.

¹³⁴ *Institutes*, 3.20.3, emphasis mine.

¹³⁵ *Institutes*, 1.18.3, 3.20.3.

the Christian in the life of Christ through faith. Often, when Calvin frames prayer as an exercise or training in the faith of Christ, he immediately turns to the language of the Spirit. And, conversely, when he discusses the role of the Spirit, he is adamant that the Spirit's work is to enable and hone precisely human activity rather than indolence:

These things are not said in order that we, favoring our own slothfulness, may give over the function of prayer to the Spirit of God, and vegetate in that carelessness to which we are all too prone. In this strain we hear the impious voices of certain persons, saying that we should drowsily wait until he overtake our preoccupied minds. But rather our intention is that, loathing our inertia and dullness, we should seek such aid of the Spirit.... The prompting of the Spirit empowers us so to compose prayers as by no means to hinder or hold back our own effort, since in this matter God's will is to test how effectually faith moves our hearts.¹³⁶

The work of the Spirit thus fills out the framework of participation, providing an account for how human activity is taken into divine activity relevant both for providence and for the faith of Christ. But perhaps one of the most telling functions of the Spirit has to do with the covenant of adoption.

When Calvin invokes the Spirit in his chapter on prayer, however, he often links the activity of the Spirit to "adoption"—a term that speaks to the re-signifying force of the Trinitarian structure in which God is, from the perspective of the believing individual, acknowledged as *Father*. For example, when referring to prayer as a training of the heart, Calvin writes in a Pauline register that it is the "Spirit of adoption" that "seals the witness of the gospel in our hearts, raises up our spirits to dare show forth to God their desires, to stir up unspeakable groanings, and confidently cry, 'Abba! Father!'"¹³⁷ On one level, the language of adoption continues the particular covenantal structure that cuts across the *Institutes*. While Calvin never devotes a particular *locus* to adoption nor treats it as a doctrine in itself, he consistently relies on the concept when giving an account for exactly how the divine life addresses

¹³⁶ *Institutes*, 3.20.5.

¹³⁷ *Institutes*, 3.20.1.

the human life of the believer.¹³⁸ Thus, for my purposes, touching upon the covenant of adoption helps to secure another theme carried forward from Calvin's doctrine of providence into his discussion of the sacraments, namely the distinction he maintains between Creator and creation, heaven and earth, and the general and special will of God and intermediaries. When one grasps the mechanics of adoption as Calvin understands them, it becomes possible to understand precisely how participation can be emphasized without losing the ontological distinctions to which Calvin is committed. Furthermore, because adoption is ultimately the work of the Spirit toward the end of cultivating the collective body of Christ, this concept simultaneously ties the practices of participation in the faith of Christ to the practices of the church at large. And from this we begin to see the logic out of which the church is properly constituted—a logic that follows the providentially-oriented doctrine of creation and salvation (the *duplex cognitio Dei*) to ultimately affirm and re-name the self as one of “ourselves”—as one among the community of the children of God (*cognitio nostri*).

Perhaps the most important thing to grasp about Calvin's treatment of adoption is the way it accounts for Calvin's insistence upon the priority of God's willing action and the mode of that action in moving from the special to the general. When Calvin speaks of adoption, it consistently follows from the eternal “sonship” of Christ. Thus, Calvin views the covenants made by God with the Israelites prior to the advent of Christ as fundamentally consistent with the covenant following the coming of Christ. For example, in the chapter when Calvin discusses the agreement between “old” and “new” covenants, the first point of continuity has to do with the character of both as adoptive and furthermore as “certified” through special modes of signification: oracles, the law, and the prophets. The second has to do with the initiation of the covenant and its certification by God; and the third focuses on the continuity of “Christ the Mediator, through whom they were joined to God and were to share in his

¹³⁸ For more on the significance of adoption in Calvin's thought, see Partee, *Theology*, especially 173-5, and Canlis, 130-ff.

promises.”¹³⁹ Later, when Calvin applies this framework specifically to the practices of the Christian life, he affirms that adoption secures the ability for human lives to “express” [*repraesentare*] Christ.¹⁴⁰ We can discern a repetition of the pattern first visible in providence: creation and salvation alike move from the creator through the special activity of the mediator to the people more generally, who are thus recreated by means of aids and signs through the working of the Spirit. With the historical appearance of Christ the Mediator, the pattern is differentiated through its repetition, not in its basic structure.

From the perspective of a human person, however, Calvin makes clear that *adoption* represents a reorientation precisely through a shift in signification, or what Calvin would call a shift in the status of the person to one who lives “as if [her] innocence were confirmed.”¹⁴¹ This shift renders a person one whose possibility is anchored in creation but which is realized (or “expressed”) by means of properly living into the system of divine and natural signs. For example, returning to Calvin’s view of justification by faith, the putative dynamics of adoption become clear: “‘To justify’ means nothing else than to acquit of guilt those who are accused, *as if* their innocence were confirmed.”¹⁴² The logic of adoption, then, carries forward not only the movement from special to general but also the providential pattern of election and affirmation of the created order, here at the level of human life. Because God elects the Mediator as both God and Human, God in a sense elects one human as the site of the divine.

Adoption extends these benefits to many more, not by taking them up into the substance of the divine, but by affirming their distinct existence and adopting them as such into the pattern of the divine

¹³⁹ *Institutes*, 2.10.2.

¹⁴⁰ *Institutes*, 3.6.3.

¹⁴¹ *Institutes*, 3.11.3.

¹⁴² *Institutes*, 3.11.3. Emphasis mine.

life always understood in terms of its activity.¹⁴³ Calvin explicitly sees this as a unilateral acceptance on the part of God,¹⁴⁴ but like providence itself, it is an acceptance that is actively created through the Spirit. Observe, for instance, the language of creation evident in the following passage: “Whomever, therefore, God receives into grace, on them he at the same time bestows the spirit of adoption, by whose power he remakes them to his own image.”¹⁴⁵ And this creation is, accordingly, always the creation of a community through which the activity of Christ gives way to the body of Christ knit through the Spirit.¹⁴⁶

The movements of this pattern once again come into clearest view when we return to the chapter on prayer. There, Calvin quite beautifully describes the way Christian teaching on the Trinity and providence—and this movement of affirmation through adoption coupled with the ongoing persuasive and directing activity of the divine within that context—ultimately will come to constitute the activity of the church:

But because the narrowness of our hearts cannot comprehend God’s boundless favor, not only is Christ the pledge and guarantee of our adoption, but he gives the Spirit as witness to us of the same adoption, through whom with a free and full voice we may cry, “Abba, Father.” Therefore, whenever any hesitation shall hinder us, let us remember to ask him to correct our fearfulness, and to set before us that Spirit that he may guide us to pray boldly. However, we are not so instructed that each one of us should individually call him *his Father*, but rather that all of us in common should call him *our Father*. From this fact we are warned how great a feeling of brotherly love ought to be among us, since by the same right of mercy and free liberality we are

¹⁴³ Calvin’s argument with Osiander makes clear his refusal of any view of salvation as consubstance with the divine. See, again, Canlis, 130-ff.

¹⁴⁴ *Institutes*, 3.11.4.

¹⁴⁵ *Institutes*, 3.11.6.

¹⁴⁶ For example, it is evident from the following passage that Calvin’s Trinitarian logic ends with the Spirit fostering the corporate body of Christ. From one of Calvin’s lengthy polemics against Osiander: “But because [Osiander] does not observe the bond of this unity, he deceives himself. Now it is easy for us to resolve all his difficulties. For we hold ourselves to be united to Christ by the secret power of his Spirit” (*Institutes* 3.11.5).

equally children of such a father.... To sum up, all prayers ought to be such as to look to that community which our Lord has established in his Kingdom and his household.¹⁴⁷

With this, we see how Calvin has accounted for the origin and constitution of the church from the ground up, as it were. The pattern of providence, and more specifically of creation as known most usefully and beneficially through providence, have been repeated and layered through the particular activity of Christ and finally the particular activity of the Spirit. Creation has moved from the inception of mundane and material life to the re-constitution of the human and now finally to the creation of “a people.” The knowledge of God the Creator and Redeemer have finally become fully connected to the knowledge of not just “the self,” but *ourselves* [*nostris*] through the Spirit. Now we have to look, finally, at the practices of sacramental signification that emerge to constitute and maintain this “spiritual” body of Christ in the world.

b. The Church, Sacramental Signification, and the Two Bodies of Christ

I have argued so far that the discourse on providence¹⁴⁸ as it appears in Calvin is a practice patterned on immanent affirmation and faithful re-naming of the world in relation to the provident God. Within the scope of Calvin’s aims in the *Institutes*, this argument naturally concludes in book four with Calvin’s discussion of the work and activity of the church—the body of Christ—as defined simply by the two marks of Word and Sacrament. I have discussed how the practice of prayer constitutes the responsive activity on the part of the believer to the activity of God through the faith of Christ. I will now show that, in a structurally resonant way, the activity of the church constitutes the responsive activity to God’s more general and affirming providential activity. Not coincidentally, Calvin’s discussion of the church also finally offers us a full theorization of the signification that I have argued has

¹⁴⁷ *Institutes*, 3.20.37-38. Emphasis in text.

¹⁴⁸ I use “discourse” in the Foucauldian sense to refer to a set of arguments that operate within a larger field of practices. See my discussion of this, and of other instances of the “discourse on providence” in chapter two.

structured his teaching throughout. If prayer is an exercise that realizes the believer's union with Christ, the sacraments are practices that realize God's fundamental, Trinitarian relationship to creation, following the incarnation in anchoring the relationship between sign and signified at the level of the material and embodied life of human beings. My purpose in this closing section is twofold. First, I will connect the themes of this chapter to the marks of the church and the theory of signification which Calvin provides to accompany his discussion of the sacraments. Second, I will take a closer look at Eucharistic signification in particular, in order to flesh out Calvin's theory of signification and relate it to the semiotics of providence.¹⁴⁹ This will prepare us for the final chapter in which I will discuss the relation of Calvin's view of providential practices to civic life in the context of the itinerary of the *Institutes* as a whole, the discourse on providence in general, and the wider context of more recent theoretical discussions.

¹⁴⁹ Historically, Calvin's treatment of the Eucharist is particularly interesting as one that emerged toward the end of a period of unprecedented anxiety and argumentation concerning the metaphysical mechanics of the Lord's Supper. While the ongoing celebration of the Eucharist is among the most ancient of Christian rituals, it would remain surprisingly un-polemized throughout the first millennium of Christianity. Even in the third part of Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* (13th century), we see the sacrament of the Eucharist enjoy a treatment relatively unmarked by polemic. Thomas, for example, easily recognizes that this one sacrament carries a threefold significance, corresponding to past, present and future: first, as a memorial of Christ's last supper with his disciples; second, as an enactment of the Ecclesiastical unity through which the individual members are united in their participation with the body of Christ; and third, as a foretaste of "Divine fruition," when the grace of God will be realized in life everlasting (*Summa Theologica*, III, 73, 4).

In contrast, the *Institutes*' treatment of the sacrament follows not only after the technical term "transubstantiation" had entered Church vocabulary in the early 13th century during the Fourth Lateran Council, but also after this term had come under attack from early 16th century reformers who then proceeded to fight about the meaning of the supper amongst themselves. Calvin's writing on the topic, as it appears in the 1559 *Institutes*, follows some thirty years after the public Luther-Zwingli dispute which carried high stakes for subsequent relations between the Lutheran churches, the Swiss Federation, and proliferating Anabaptist groups. In certain respects, then, Calvin's discussion is rich with a theoretical precision not available to earlier treatments of the Eucharist. In other ways, however, Calvin's treatment sometimes feels overextended in its attempt to bridge the polarization resulting from the disagreement between Luther and Zwingli: Luther, who rejected the metaphysical trappings of transubstantiation while maintaining the real physical presence of the body of Christ in the meal ("sacramental unity"), and Zwingli, who insisted upon the Lord's Supper as a memorial meal aimed to foster the unity of the community. For a more extended treatment of the origin of these Reformation debates and their historical impact, see Amy Nelson Burnett, *Karlstadt and the Origins of the Eucharistic Controversy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

In book four, “The External Means or Aims by Which God Invites Us Into the Society of Christ and Holds Us Therein,” Calvin steps forward from the work of Christ and the Spirit as they pertain to the individual human being and finally reconnects the *cognitio Dei et nostri* to the more general context of collective life. Where book one began in the collective context of creation, however, book four turns to the collective context of social exercises—not as a separate sphere, but explicitly as the continuation of the “plan of instruction” designed to mimic God’s providential pedagogy.¹⁵⁰ If book one frames the beginning of the journey as realizing one’s relational constitution *as* a creature, book four accomplishes the journey by outlining the context through which creatures may more fully realize and experience the benefit of this relation instituted by the Creator. According to Calvin, in the opening sentences of book four, “[Since] we need outward helps [*externis subsidiis*] to beget and increase faith within us, and advance it to its goal [*ad metam*], God has also added these aids that he may provide for our weakness.”¹⁵¹ He proceeds to outline the practices of the church as the preaching of pastors and teachers, “through whose lips he might teach his own,” and the sacraments, “which we who have experienced them feel [*nos experimento sentimus*] to be highly useful aids to foster and strengthen faith.”¹⁵² Through these features, the church forwards the shape, material means, and *scopus* of Christian teaching (ch. 3):

God, therefore, in his wonderful providence, accommodating himself to our capacity, has prescribed a way for us, though still far off, to draw near to him.... I shall start, then, with the church, into whose bosom God is pleased to gather his children, not only that they may be nourished by her help and ministry as long as they are infants and children, but also that they may be guided by her motherly care until they mature and at least reach the goal of faith.¹⁵³

¹⁵⁰ *Institutes*, 4.1.1.

¹⁵¹ *Institutes*, 4.1.1.

¹⁵² *Institutes*, 4.1.1.

¹⁵³ *Institutes*, 4.1.1.

The dual activities of preaching and performing the sacraments thus mimic and reiterate the more general features of Calvin's Christian pedagogy (ch. 4). That is, "Word and Sacrament" continue the pattern Calvin has employed that relates knowledge to use and benefit, revelation to perception, the rule of faith to rule of love, and creative/incarnational special grace to general ecclesial gratitude. In each pairing, we find a similar movement: an active, signifying gesture on the part of God toward creation occasioning an active re-orienting (through re-naming) response on the part of humanity with respect to God and material life.

As Calvin moves into his discussion of the church, we begin to see the immanently-critical import of his project coming to bear. Not only does his view of the church build upon the various patterns of teaching established early in the text and anchored in an extra-ecclesial "natural theology" of providence, but Calvin also suggests that these patterns provide the conceptual weight needed to decisively critique the wayward institution of the Roman church: "At the same time, we are to call back godly readers from those corruptions by which Satan, in the papacy, has pulled everything God had appointed for our salvation."¹⁵⁴ By establishing the origin of Christian pedagogy in the general relationship between the corruption of knowledge and perception and its remedy through the activity of God that occasions the responsive activity of people, Calvin's discussion of the church mimics the pattern of his earliest discussion of the theater of God's glory veiled by the corruption of the *sensus divinitatis*. The church, as an outgrowth of the providential order of creation, manifests and perpetuates the same tendencies toward idolatry to which sin-warped cognition, perception and affection render human beings prone. It is thus not only marked by defect, but its defects are reified by the positive force of fallen behavior. For Calvin, however, this means that the divinely-given remedy for

¹⁵⁴ *Institutes*, 4.1.1.

the corruption of the church comes under the purview of all Christian teaching; it has to do with the proper relation to the system of divinely created things and divinely given signs.¹⁵⁵

Thus, we can begin to appreciate the more philosophical in addition to the theological and scriptural basis for Calvin's church-defining pairing of Word and Sacrament. Just as (a) the recognition of God's creative affirmation of the world and human beings' affirmative response constitute the fundamental practices of creatures within the sphere of creation and (b) faith and prayer constitute the fundamental practices of the Christian within the sphere of individual life, we now see that (c) Word and Sacrament constitute the fundamental practices of Christian formation within the social and collective sphere of the church. Thus, for Calvin, "Whenever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists."¹⁵⁶ For the purpose of understanding how the activity of the church completes the basic activity of providence, however, it is necessary to ascertain the relationship that obtains between Word and Sacrament, one fundamentally mediated by divine signification.

I want to argue, in this vein, that in spite of the logo-centric reputation of the Reformation and Calvinism in particular,¹⁵⁷ Word and Sacrament are in fact not hierarchically ordered in the *Institutes*, but ritually (repetitively, materially, and practically) related. By paying closer attention to the way signs are

¹⁵⁵ For example, when Calvin rhetorically appropriates the language of apostolic succession to secure the authority of the church, he anchors that succession on the reception and teaching of the word of the gospel. In conversation with Augustine, Calvin writes, "The authority of the church is an introduction through which we are prepared for faith in the gospel.... [Augustine] reproaches Faustus for not submitting to the gospel truth—so firm, so stable, celebrated with such glory, and handed down from the time of the apostles through a sure succession" (*Institutes* 1.17.3).

¹⁵⁶ *Institutes*, 4.1.9.

¹⁵⁷ As I discussed in the [introduction], the decision of a trajectory of reformers to critique the established church by emphasizing the written word (*sola scriptura*) not only reified the perception that scripture is somehow exceptional as a site of engagement and interpretation, but also gave way to a number of false dichotomies between cognition and bodies, words and actions that would shape many modern theories of ritual in unhelpful ways. Part of the intent of this project is to argue that the binary between scripture and other forms of experience and practice was never so rigid in Calvin's writing.

negotiated through Word and Sacrament, we begin to see that Calvin's distinction between Creator and creation combined with the sets of practices he outlines, constructs a scheme in which *both* divine freedom *and* the divine affirmation of immanence that undergirds robust human activity as likewise free and materially-affirming.¹⁵⁸ The question is whether or not, from the perspective of Calvin and his readers, the Word conceptually precedes and thus determines the materiality of the sacraments, or alternatively whether the Word is reciprocally undergirded by the materiality of the sacraments.¹⁵⁹ Put another way: this question pushes us to consider the importance of material life within Calvin's theological program, and to address whether or not the more discursive categories including *voluntas*, *consignatio*, *cognitio* and *verbum* are, for a Christian, ultimately separable from their materialized counterparts which are accessed through *sensus* and *percipio*. Understanding this is key to finally grasping how the relationship between transcendence and immanence is figured in Calvin's *Institutes*, and ultimately how Calvin's project offers a novel approach to immanence deeply concerned with constituting participation in a reformed church and city.

It can be tempting to assume that Calvin adjudicates the sacraments strictly by the rule of *sola scriptura*. After all, he limits the true sacraments to the two that we find instituted expressly by Christ in

¹⁵⁸ This suggests a view of human freedom as intersubjectively constituted, or anchored in the relationship of divine freedom. A number of more recent authors, both within and outside the discipline of theology, have argued for an understanding of subjectivity that does not rely upon a unitary, self-consistent subject nor open a binary involving freedom and determination. Important developments of this theme within the reformed theological tradition are to be found in Karl Barth's later work and across Dietrich Bonhoeffer's corpus from *Sanctorum Communio* to *Ethics*. For a most helpful a contemporary theorization of ethical responsibility across and constituted through difference and opacity, see Judith Butler's *Giving An Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).

¹⁵⁹ As a historical note, Calvin emphasizes the Word in relation to the sacrament under the auspices of a practice in which the importance of the matter was already taken for granted. The later Calvinist reputation for emphasizing Word to the exclusion of the importance of matter developed later and in a very different historical context. In other words, Calvin's emphasis on the accompaniment of the Word needs to be placed against a backdrop of general recognition concerning the importance of the material and repetitive aspect of the ritual.

the gospel accounts: baptism and the Lord's Supper.¹⁶⁰ Furthermore, when Calvin teaches the proper order of administering these sacraments, he insists on the importance of the Word to accompany and even cognitively present the ritual act. However, to give a decisive priority to the importance of words over activity misreads not only Calvin's theology of scripture, which emphasizes the clarifying and resignifying relationship of scripture to the world through the Spirit; it also overlooks the structure of Calvin's deeply Augustinian theory of signs. As I argued in the previous chapter, for Augustine divine signs can be things and things can be divine signs. Furthermore, signs do not relate to things by superseding them, but by relationally disposing them according to their proper origin and end in relation to God. Although from the perspective of sinful human beings signs are initially dislocated from their referent, the natural relationship between signs and things veiled by sin becomes pedagogically anchored in the performative act of divine incarnation in which Word and Flesh are fundamentally linked.

Similarly, for Calvin, sacraments are accompanied by a preceding and thus conceptually distinct "promise"; but the sacrament accomplishes precisely the materialization and realization of the promise in the immanent realm of created life. In this respect, the sacrament does not reveal the promise and then fall away; rather, the sacrament secures the substance of the promise, or the sense in which the promise itself is realized precisely in its relation to the material sphere of human life. According to Calvin,

As our faith is slight and feeble unless it be propped on all sides and sustained by every means, it trembles, wavers, totters, and at last gives way. Here our merciful Lord, according to his infinite kindness, so tempers himself to our capacity that, since we are creatures who always creep on the ground, cleave to the flesh, and, do not think about or even conceive of anything spiritual, he condescends to lead us to himself even by these earthly elements, and to set before us in the flesh a mirror of spiritual blessings. For if we were incorporeal (as Chrysostom says), he would

¹⁶⁰ It should be emphasized that Calvin's stated reasoning for this argument does not discuss *sola scriptura* or suggest that this commitment uniquely anchors his view of the sacraments. What seems to be the driving claim is that the sacraments were instituted by Christ.

give us these very things naked and incorporeal. Now, because we have souls engrafted in bodies, he imparts spiritual things under visible ones. Not that the gifts set before us in the sacraments are bestowed with the natures of the things, but that they have been marked with this signification by God.¹⁶¹

In this passage, there is no mention of the sacrament lifting one out of the material or passing beyond the material except as a cognitive error. The teaching is quite the opposite: the sacrament tangibly affirms creation as the site in which the divine addresses the human. Also, like Augustine, Calvin does not ignore the role of habituation, and particularly the central role of the church in staging Christian habituation. For example, he writes that “the sacraments... are exercises which make us more certain of the trustworthiness of God’s Word. And because we are of the flesh, they are shown us under [*sub*] things of flesh, to instruct us according to our dull capacity, and to lead us by the hand as tutors lead children.”¹⁶² As with prayer, the bodily gestures and repetition are inseparable from the force of the sacramental practice.¹⁶³

One way to grasp the persisting importance of created materiality in Calvin’s view of Christian practice is to look more closely at the logic of the sacramental cycle as it shapes a life lived toward and in union with Christ. Regarding both baptism and the Lord’s Supper, Calvin makes clear that the preaching of the Word is a necessary component of what renders mere water and food sacramental as such. According to Calvin, “A sacrament is never without a preceding promise but is joined to it as a sort of appendix, with the purpose of conforming and sealing the promise itself, and of making it more evident to us and in a sense ratifying it.” He adds, however, that “properly speaking, it is not so much needed to

¹⁶¹ *Institutes*, 4.14.3.

¹⁶² *Institutes*, 4.14.6.

¹⁶³ This may finally point to something I have been gesturing at along the way, namely the sense in which Calvin understands certainty to function. If cognition and habituation are related in the participation of word and sacrament, then certainty involves not merely cognition but a certain force of habit that accompanies, disposes, and is disposed by the sharpening of cognitions. This is important because it resists an anachronistic understanding of certainty as a kind of conceptual or mental incorrigibility.

confirm his Sacred Word as to establish us in faith in it.”¹⁶⁴ Calvin therefore suggests that the material quality of the sacramental elements is not incidentally important, but irreducibly important for their formative function. Thus, as an ardent defender of paedo-baptism, Calvin argues that from the perspective of the individual infant, the material mark precedes and, performed alongside the forgiving gesture of the community, habituates¹⁶⁵ that child’s later ability to cognitively grasp the spiritual referent of the sign of water.¹⁶⁶ Observe how, in Calvin’s language, the force of the physical precedes and undergirds the eventually-adjoining role of cognition: “The children receive some benefit from their baptism: being engrafted into the body of the church, they are somewhat more commended to the other members. Then, when they have grown up, they are greatly spurred to an earnest zeal for worshipping God, by whom they were received as children through a solemn symbol of adoption before they were old enough to recognize him as father.”¹⁶⁷ The baptism thus creates the conditions for a Christian life, conditions that are performatively enacted by the materialized body of Christ in the living members of the church that prepare a properly formed intellect through related teaching and habituation.¹⁶⁸ The church, in this sense, enacts the pattern of the divine elective decree not in a vague or hidden sense, but in a special and concrete sense by marking the child for baptism and collectively performing her forgiveness and adoption into the family of God.¹⁶⁹ The sacrament likewise performs the affirmation of the very sentient life that is elected to mark and bear these spiritual relations.

¹⁶⁴ *Institutes*, 4.14.3.

¹⁶⁵ Habituates, that is, both through the mark of baptism and through the attendant activity (inclusive of cognition) of the family and church whose vows accompany the baptism.

¹⁶⁶ *Institutes*, 4.16.21.

¹⁶⁷ *Institutes*, 4.16.9.

¹⁶⁸ The sense in which the church functions as the materialized body of Christ will be elaborated shortly.

¹⁶⁹ On the sense in which forgiveness by faith is collectively and publicly enacted in the sacrament of baptism, see the argument that runs from *Institutes* 4.15.13-15 as well as 4.16.21-22.

When Calvin moves to the Lord's Supper, which he reserves for those who are old enough to have openly embraced their baptism, he places more emphasis on the cognitive understanding of the sacrament. For example, Calvin repeats the Pauline warnings about the supper causing bodily harm to those who partake without faith: "If only those who know how to distinguish rightly the holiness of Christ's body are able to participate worthily, why should we offer poison instead of life-giving food to our tender children?"¹⁷⁰ The logic undergirding this claim, however, relies upon the continuing importance of the promises of God as they pertain to the disposition of material life, or the way in which the materialized promise of the incarnation becomes properly *joined to or enacted within* material life more generally. In other words, the Lord's Supper signifies or points to the reality of Christ's body joined analogically—spiritually—to the body of the believer. Calvin makes this clear in a number of places, at times invoking even the larger narrative of providence. See, for example, the following passage:

We are taught from the Scriptures that Christ was from the beginning the life-giving Word of the Father, the spring and source of life, from which all things have always received their capacity to live. Therefore, John sometimes calls him "the Word of life"... meaning that he, flowing even into all creatures, instilled in them the power to breathe and live.... But when the Source of life begins to abide in our flesh, he no longer lies hidden far from us, but shows us that we are to partake of him. But he also quickens our very flesh in which he abides, that by partaking of him we may be fed unto immortality. "I am," he says, "the bread of life come down from heaven. And the bread which I shall give is my flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world. By these words he teaches not only that he is life since he is the eternal Word of God, who came down from heaven to us, but also that by coming down he poured that power upon the flesh which he took in order that from it participation in life might flow unto us."¹⁷¹

The Word joined to Flesh in Christ establishes the pattern through which human flesh participates in Word through the sacrament. Following this logic, we can see that partaking of the sacrament without faith in the Word (or promise) does not activate a curse in any magical sense, but rather a deliberate

¹⁷⁰ *Institutes*, 4.16.30.

¹⁷¹ *Institutes*, 4.17.8.

and deleterious failure of signification. That is, to return to Augustine's language, partaking of the Lord's Supper without faith amounts to a denial of the rule of faith (faith in the coincidence of signs and things through creation and incarnation) without which the rule of love (enactment of the coincidence of signs and things) can take no effect. In Calvin's view, such an eating re-enacts the refractive separation of the divine origin from immanent life, a movement which corresponds to Calvin's understanding of sin.¹⁷² Taken in faith, however, the Lord's Supper works to return the believing youth or adult *to* her flesh as the location in which God's glory shines, from which she can learn to live into her adoption through participation.

At this point, with some sense for how Calvin's theory of signification operates with respect to the sacraments, let us look at how that theory coheres with his entire project. He maintains from the outset that sacraments are mysteries: not only does he link the etymology of sacrament to the Greek cognate *mysterion*,¹⁷³ he also echoes Paul. Calvin writes, "'This,' [Paul] says, 'is a great mystery.' It would be extreme madness to recognize no communion of believers with the flesh and blood of the Lord, which the apostle declares to be so great that he prefers to marvel at it rather than to explain it."¹⁷⁴ Yet, in spite of these disavowals, Calvin does not shy away from devoting significant space to unpacking just how it is that the Eucharist performs its function within the life of the church. His ability to provide a more technical "explanation," however, is consistent with such a claim inasmuch as the mechanics of the sacraments are linked not to God *in se*, but to the work of Christ *pro nobis* which has now become the work of the church through adoption and participation. It is in this discussion of signification that Calvin most explicitly maps for his reader the precise steps that tie the intellect to embodied practice—*cognitio* to *sensus* and *afficio*—and thus illumine the layering that exists between

¹⁷² See, for example, 4.14.15.

¹⁷³ See Calvin's etymological discussion in 4.14.2.

¹⁷⁴ *Institutes*, 4.17.9.

the doctrines of creation and providence, incarnation, justification and prayer, and now the constitution of the church as the body of Christ on earth.¹⁷⁵

To get at this, we approach the second way in which we can understand the sacraments' relation to materiality: namely, the vital role played by the physical body of Christ itself in constituting the physical bodies of believers as a spiritual body. After Calvin claims that in the Eucharist the *flesh* of Christ connects to human flesh, Calvin nuances this claim by recourse to an analogical procedure: "The analogy of the sign," he writes, "applies only if souls find their nourishment in Christ—which cannot happen unless Christ truly grows into one with us, and refreshes us by the eating of his flesh and the drinking of his blood."¹⁷⁶ Calvin unpacks this analogy by maintaining that the real physical existence of Christ continues not just anywhere, but at the right hand of God where Christ ascended.¹⁷⁷

While this assertion may strike a contemporary reader as overly literal, it performs an enormous amount of conceptual work for Calvin. He draws this claim from the scriptural accounts of Christ's corporeal resurrection followed by his ascension, which is found at the end of the gospel of Matthew as

¹⁷⁵ In other passages, Calvin continues the point that sacramental signs act as images that appeal precisely to the perception, thus restoring the relationship between human beings and God more deeply than would be possible with words alone: "We might call [sacraments] mirrors in which we may contemplate the riches of God's grace, which he lavishes upon us. For by them he manifests himself to us as far as our dullness is given to perceive, and attests his good will and love toward us more expressly than by word" (4.14.6). And, not surprisingly, Calvin quickly incorporates affections into the work of the sacraments: "Finally, he illumines our minds by the light of his Holy Spirit and opens our hearts for the Word and sacraments to enter in, which would otherwise only strike our ears and appear before our eyes, but not at all affect us within" (4.14.9). In the cognitive, perceptive, and affective function of the sacraments, it is not hard to glimpse a subtle reference to the Trinity and its work—creative, mediatory, and finally the active "moving of the mind." In this language, furnished by Calvin several sections later, we see a particularly helpful description of the role of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit finally realizes the aids supplied by cognition and perception precisely through moving a person—mind and body—from the heart (see 4.14.11). We also see, finally, the reiteration of the Augustinian pedagogical frame of faith, hope and love, which traces back to his *Enchiridion* (see my discussion chapter three).

¹⁷⁶ *Institutes*, 4.17.10.

¹⁷⁷ This claim concerning the local presence of Christ in heaven constitutes the key disagreement between Calvin and Luther's doctrine of the ubiquity of the body of Christ. For more on this, see "Calvin and His Lutheran Critics," chapter 12 of David Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Richard A. Muller, "Calvin on Sacramental Presence, in the Shadow of Marburg and Zurich," in *Lutheran Quarterly* 23 (2009): 147-67; and on the politics of this disagreement, see F. Bruce Gordon, *Calvin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 167-ff.

well as the transition between Luke and Acts. In the Luke-Acts version in particular, the absence of the corporeal Christ sets the conditions for the coming of the Spirit and the formation of the spiritual body of Christ as the church.¹⁷⁸ For Calvin, this not only anchors the particular character of Trinitarian work and its relationship to the immanent world, in a sense consummated in the formation and activity of the church; it also marks another repetition of the pattern located first in providence, the pattern in which God's work moves from special to general. Christ is not only the Son, he is furthermore the specially chosen human being whose incarnation performs the relationship between sign and thing [*signa et res*] that undergirds the relationship of signs more widely. Through the work of the Spirit in constituting the church—particularly through its perpetual practices of Word and Sacrament—the more general system of signs and things, stemming from creation itself, may become manifest on earth.

In addition, by maintaining the singular corporeal reality of the risen Christ, Calvin is able to simultaneously maintain the reality of that which is signified in the Eucharist—Christ for us, united to us—along with the set of distinctions between Creator/creation and God/humanity to which he is characteristically committed. In the words of Calvin,

Now, that sacred partaking of his flesh and blood, by which Christ pours his life into us, *as if* it penetrated into our bones and marrow, he also testifies and seals in the Supper—not by presenting a vain and empty sign, but by manifesting there the effectiveness of his Spirit to fulfill what he promises. And truly he offers and shows the reality there signified to all who sit at that spiritual banquet, although it is received with benefit by believers alone, who accept such great generosity with true faith and gratefulness of heart.... I indeed admit that the breaking of bread is a symbol [*symbolum*];¹⁷⁹ it is not the thing itself. But, having admitted this, we shall nevertheless duly infer that by the showing of the symbol the thing itself is also shown.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁸ See Luke 24:36-53 and Acts 1:1-11, 2:1-47.

¹⁷⁹ *Symbolum* is the Latin transliteration of a Greek cognate which originally referred to an identification made by virtue of two separate halves being rejoined. While Calvin seems to use *symbolum* alongside *signa* in his Eucharistic discussions, he does not often refer to *symbolum* outside of this context. For more on this, see Elwood, 7-8; G.R. Evans, "Calvin on Signs: An Augustinian Dilemma"; and Gerhart B. Ladner, "Medieval and Modern Understanding of Symbolism" *Speculum* 54:2 (Apr., 1979): 223-56.

¹⁸⁰ *Institutes*, 4.17.10.

Within this quote, certain themes of Calvin's teaching re-emerge in the dynamics of the Eucharist itself: the knowledge of Christ becomes effective through the meal by means of the Spirit who fulfills the promise in the lives of believers. Believers thus receive the benefit of this knowledge through living out and enjoying the fruits of adoption into the family of God the Creator. In the completion of this full movement of the fourth book, the *signa* finally relates to its proper *res* from the perspective of the Christian. That is, the material sign is disposed by the Word (who initiates the sacrament) to point to and analogically participate *in* the Word (the singular body of Christ who anchors the sacrament) and by means of the activity of believers through the active grace of the Spirit. Once more, in this activity, there is a concrete touchstone between the creation and the Creator, and this touchstone establishes a wider family adopted by God and named children—the church, or the more general “body of Christ.” Thus Calvin continues as follows:

And the godly by all means ought to keep this rule: whenever they see symbols appointed by the Lord, to think and be persuaded that the truth of the thing signified is surely present there. For why should the Lord put in your hand the symbol of his body, except to assure you of a true participation in it? But if it is true that a visible sign is given us to seal the gift of a thing invisible, when we have received the symbol of the body, let us no less surely trust that the body itself is also given to us.¹⁸¹

In other words, while the sacrament works analogically to secure the relationship between the visible and the invisible, Calvin refuses any suggestion that the divine is located merely in the invisible, as if the invisible exists apart from the visible. For the analogy to hold, the divine must also be present in the matter. This is the special work accomplished by the embodied Word through the Spirit, who realizes its general effects and benefits.

In order to argue this point more precisely, Calvin breaks down the components of the process of signification into the following three parts: the signification, the matter that depends upon it, and the

¹⁸¹ *Institutes*, 4.17.10.

power or effect that follows from their coincidence.¹⁸² And while Calvin wants to insist that the singular matter of Christ's individual body is not re-presented in the Eucharist—it is singular and real, after all, and in this sense one body among many—he nonetheless insists that it is the *de facto* existent matter of Christ's singular body that is the matter of the sacrament and that links all matter decisively to the divine Word: "Christ is the matter or (if you prefer) the substance of all the sacraments; for in him they have all their firmness, and they do not promise anything apart from him."¹⁸³ The sacraments, in other words, rely upon the *signa* and *res* of Christ's singular body in order to carry out a promise with wider, spiritual repercussions. Calvin thus associates the activity of the fully Trinitarian God *and* the activity of human participation with all parts of the sacramental process. Between the coincident sign and matter that are the symbol of the Eucharist, a ritually-activated and repeated relationship obtains. To simply grasp the Lord's Supper as a sign—as a practice that points away from itself to a distant spiritual reality—is therefore not the endpoint of the practice. Rather, the materialization of Christ in the community through the Spirit—the rippling realization of this signification more widely, that God is known in God's relation to our flesh—is equally the goal. On this point, Calvin could not be more explicit: "For the promises offer [Christ], not for us to halt in the appearance and bear knowledge alone, but to enjoy true participation in him."¹⁸⁴ With this, Calvin has effectively rebuilt the *raison d'être* of the church from the ground up—from the post-lapsarian disjunction of *cognitio*, *sensus* and *afficio* to the post-incarnation re-stitching of these facets of human being in community with God and each other.

The initial failure of the knowledge of God and ourselves is thus remedied most simply through the movement of a *pietas* that imitates the fundamentally providential divine activity outlined in the first part of this chapter, constituting a participation which both employs and exceeds *cognitio*. As I

¹⁸² *Institutes*, 4.17.11.

¹⁸³ *Institutes*, 4.14.16.

¹⁸⁴ *Institutes*, 4.17.11.

have already shown in chapter three, however, Calvin does not end the work here. If he had ended with the discussion of Eucharistic signification, the aim of the *Institutes* might naturally have led to the vision of the church as the heavenly Jerusalem, following Christ's singular body to the right hand of God.¹⁸⁵ Rather, Calvin's written journey leads its reader through the church to the immanent context of the generalized earthly kingdom, a place where things do not achieve such a neat resolution.¹⁸⁶ Calvin's writing remains expository rather than figurative. He does not lift a reader out of the world, nor does he figure the corporate church as gradually becoming the city itself. Instead, he describes a setting in which the church habituates persons for reformed living *in* the city, thus occupying a perpetually active, affirming, and at times limiting or resistant posture of citizenship.

The text leaves us undecided as to whether, in the end, immanence or transcendence is the ultimate aim of Christian life. Or perhaps this is the wrong question to be asking. Perhaps what Calvin actually leaves us is a compelling account of the way in which notions of transcendence and immanence are not only conceptually interdependent from the perspective of human beings, but can also work to constitute a certain brand of perpetual responsibility that shapes the contours of one's time on earth. His account is one in which the pursuit of transcendence (*cognitio Dei*) leads to a form of transcendence directed toward the affirmation and adoption of immanence through the very inhabitation of immanence. In a certain respect, the function of this movement of transcendence is to "lift up" immanence.¹⁸⁷ But inasmuch as this lifting up involves participation, it invites a *creature*, housed in flesh, to mimic the affirming and adopting activity of God. After all, Calvin's sketch of the Christian citizen in the last chapter of book four looks very much like his sketch of the provident God. Calvin's

¹⁸⁵ This vision happens at the end of book three—not book four.

¹⁸⁶ For a more extended discussion of this, see the closing of chapter three.

¹⁸⁷ This, after all, is the language of the Eucharistic liturgy which Calvin affirms.

citizen is one who accepts the importance of intermediaries,¹⁸⁸ who wills their continued existence even if that means willing against one's own will,¹⁸⁹ and which in some circumstances acts to bridle political power running chaotically contrary to the divine Word.¹⁹⁰ And perhaps most importantly, the activity of citizenship is grounded in the government of creation in a general sense. Calvin privileges no particular form of government, nor does he make any attempt to depict an ideal society. The primary concern of a citizen is the ongoing care of life toward the end of manifesting its glorious relationship to God its Creator.

Several recent treatments of Calvin have rightly begun to emphasize the decisive importance of the believer's union with Christ, even a certain vision of *theosis*, within his theological project.¹⁹¹ While such readings helpfully critique the intellectualism and instrumentalism that have plagued Calvin's legacy, they should not be taken to diminish the fact that the *Institutes* does not argumentatively end with the transcendent union of an individual with God, but with the earth-grounded activity of a community in and through which God's glory is enacted: "*Laos Deo*."¹⁹² It should be emphasized that Calvin does affirm the special sense in which believers participate in Christ and, through death, join Christ in heaven. Still, the overall aim of the pedagogical program, directed toward readers who are candidates in sacred theology living and working in a reformed city, drives toward the end of the Spirit's activity in relation to the spiritual body of Christ on earth. The collective body's activity, anchored in the special coincidence of *signa* and *res* in Christ's body and the Eucharistic bread, is choreographically

¹⁸⁸ *Institutes*, 4.20.30. In fact, there is a certain demotion in the rhetoric of kings to mere intermediaries rather than as residing atop a hierarchy of divine agents. I will discuss this more in my conclusion.

¹⁸⁹ *Institutes*, 4.20.29.

¹⁹⁰ *Institutes*, 4.20.32.

¹⁹¹ See the aforementioned works: Canlis, *Calvin's Ladder*; Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift*; and Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*.

¹⁹² *Institutes*, 4.20.32.

layered atop the original created relationship between the creation and the glory of God. Calvin's work thus ends with the leaders of the church fully equipped not to believe in isolation, but to live out the pattern and practice of creation itself at the level of civic life. And this is something more than a union with Christ; it is a union with Christ that is directed toward fostering communion with others through the Spirit, and from there toward a certain way of living every facet of this terrestrial life itself. God's will to clothe God's self in intermediaries¹⁹³—and ultimately to become flesh—anchors a humanity clothed in Christ. This, in turn calls the Christian student to reorient the practices of her immanent life—to affirm her human nature and its affections, but then to work toward obedience, sanctified by the special aids given by grace: Word and Sacrament, and all the practices that these entail. The re-perception of the world *as* God's clothing (or as the theater of God's glory) thus functions to anchor the reforming effects that follow therefrom.

When Calvin leaves us in the city, he is performing one final gesture of the pattern that moves from the special to the general. If the church as the spiritual body of Christ is simultaneously the generalization of the physical body of Christ *and* its own instance of special providence undergirded by the activity of the Spirit,¹⁹⁴ then the Christian *qua* citizen becomes the perpetual enactor of general providence anchored in the practices of the church.¹⁹⁵ Just as God's providential activity continues

¹⁹³ *Institutes*, 1.17.4.

¹⁹⁴ Recall *Institutes* 1.17.1: "[Providence] strives to the end that God may reveal his concern for the whole human race, but especially his vigilance in ruling the church, which he deigns to watch more closely."

¹⁹⁵ Recall that Pamela Mason, whose work opened this chapter, speaks about the relationship between the church as a concrete unity giving way to an abstract unity:

Even in the eighteenth century it was as Calvinists that Genevans learned to be citizens, and it was through the prism of their public faith that they understood themselves as a public.... On the one hand, according to the *Institutes*, the church was a practical, going concern, the chief of the "External Means or Aids by which God invites us into the Society of Christ and Holds us Therein." But the practical community of grace was the "type" of a more abstract community, also carefully mapped out by the *Institutes*. In the church "a community is affirmed, as Luke describes, in which the heart and soul of the multitude of believers are one." The church was a "conjunction of love [which] so depends upon unity of faith that it ought to be its beginning, end, and, in fine, its sole rule"; and a union of minds and wills "joined with

alongside the existence of a flawed creation, political activity forwards but does not fully accomplish the providential arrangement of social life. In a way, the deferred signature with which Calvin closes his last preface may encapsulate the nature of this ongoing and fundamentally ritualized activity as well as any: “I count myself one of the number of those who write as they learn and learn as they write.”¹⁹⁶ The form and content of Calvin’s 1559 *Institutes* goes to great lengths to figure this very activity—the relationship between signs and the disposition of things—as the essence of a divine pedagogy devoted to accommodating itself to the particular conditions of this material life.

mutual benevolence in Christ,” apart from which “there is not an agreement of believers but a faction of wicked men.” At the heart of Calvin’s description of the church as both a particular set of institutions and an abstract unity was his understanding of the covenant of adoption (Mason, 29, 30. *Institutes* quotations are from 4.1.1, 4.1.2., and 4.2.5).

In the very language and structure of adoption that follows from the language of creation, we are reminded that it is God’s founding work of creation and providence that anchors all subsequent layers and domains of activity. We are also reminded, however, that this is a relation mediated by signification, affirmation, and inhabitation, rather than hierarchical coherence.

¹⁹⁶ *Institutes*, John Calvin to the Reader, 3.

Conclusion

From *pronoia* to immanent affirmation: Remarks on writing, politics, and glory

The most familiar story of the sixteenth-century Protestant reforms begins with a German, Augustinian monk who revolted against the Church's selling of indulgences. Thanks to a volatile mix of factors, Martin Luther's original critique of the Catholic system of merit gained wide-ranging momentum, prompting some to re-formulate a number of Christian doctrines designed to replace the system of merit in both a theoretical and practical sense. These doctrines have, since the twentieth century, been simplified into a shorthand known as Luther's five *solae*: *sola fide*, *sola gratia*, *sola scriptura*, *solus Christus*, and *solus Deo gloria*.¹ While the first two *solae* address the mechanics of salvation from both the human (faith) and divine (grace) perspective, the third reforms and limits the locus of Christian authority to scripture. The last two limit the proper objects of human praise to Christ and the glory of God, implying a rejection of prior objects of veneration and honor, including Mary, the saints, and the priesthood. These last two thus function fundamentally as critiques of idolatry.

This story is, of course, not wrong. However, to repeat it as a linear account with seemingly-inevitable consequences is to obscure the diversity of conditions that gave rise to the various branches of church reform. Calvin's story provides a case in point.² Within historical narratives of early modern Europe, Calvin's role is often appended to that of Luther; that is, he is presented as a perhaps-more rigid and law-oriented offshoot of Luther's reformation. Yet, when attention is given to the conditions that gave rise to Calvin's project of reform, a different and less familiar story emerges. Calvin was drawn into

¹ Of these, only *sola fide* and *sola gratia* appear as teachings actually articulated by the sixteenth century reformers. The latter three are catchphrases for more complicated arguments and themes.

² I hope putting the spotlight on the conditions and concerns that led to Calvin's project of reform will encourage similar investigations into the particular conditions and concerns of other reformers, including the full range of Anabaptist leaders.

church reform from within a very different geographic and political context. His efforts began when he was a university student in early sixteenth-century France, and then continued in a small Swiss city with a disproportionate number of French refugees. For Calvin, it was not principally indulgences, but the Mass that stood at the center of contention.³ If one thus assumes Calvin's historical, political, and religious reference frame, one finds that the Mass—and related issues of idolatry and power—constitute the fulcrum from which Calvin's reforms are put into motion. These issues uniquely anchor the ripple of arguments and doctrines that Calvin developed, sometimes drawing from Luther and sometimes not. They also carry with them distinct theological, political, and ethical repercussions.

My aim in this work has been to offer a reading of Calvin's doctrine of providence that is able to speak to some of these particular theological, political, and ethical repercussions. In chapters one and two, I argued that providence is a particularly compelling category, as it has long been associated with the explicitly political and ethical dimensions of life. In the last three chapters, I turned to Calvin's 1559 *Institutes* in order to give a full reading of providence that takes into account how its arguments fit into the aims of the text as a whole and also relate to other doctrinal categories that appear across the text's four books. In this conclusion, I will offer some reflections on how Calvin's writing disposes political and ethical life in a more general sense. I will connect my reading of Calvin to some of the authors discussed in chapter one, and look for some ways that putting these disparate authors in dialogue may contribute to our understanding of the relationship between theology, politics, and ethical life more generally.

In that respect, my concluding reflections do not limit themselves to the immediate repercussions of Calvin's work in the sixteenth century political landscape, but will ultimately broach present concerns over the relation between thought, practice, religion, ethics and politics in and after

³ Calvin was not the first or the last to critique the Mass. Zwingli's criticism came prior to Calvin's and generated a division in reform movements before Calvin's work had even begun. Still, the critique of the Mass particularly associated with the Placards Affair was a catalyzing event for Calvin. See Bruce Gordon, *Calvin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 40-1, 52-ff.

modernity. However, in order to gain some grasp on the political implications of Calvin's theological writing toward the end of the concrete project of reform, it will be advantageous to begin with some consideration of the sixteenth century. Since I have argued that providence holds a special relation to sacramental signification within Calvin's overall argument, it will be helpful to return to the political repercussions of this issue that so oriented Calvin's career as a reformer.

1.

Christopher Elwood's *The Body Broken* (1999) is one of the more compelling efforts to tell the story of the Eucharist and Calvinist reform.⁴ In his introduction, Elwood argues for the significance of the Eucharist within the particularly French landscape of power:

The eucharist and the meanings attached to it created particular habits of thought and action that shaped the political understanding and commitments of men and women in the sixteenth century. In its Calvinist interpretation, the eucharist created the environment that made social and political revolution possible. Why should the eucharist have played such a crucial role in the political and social unrest of the sixteenth century? The key to answering this question is to recognize that the eucharist was the central symbol of defining power in the late medieval and early modern periods.... The theologies of the eucharist formulated by Reformed Protestants, which rejected the predominant Catholic construal of the sacrament, involved radically new ways of symbolizing power. Although the association of the sacrament with power was never entirely rejected by the Reformed—and certainly not by those identified as Calvinist—they came to be harshly critical of attempts to locate power definitively in any visible thing. And because the eucharist served to symbolize power considered in a general sense, and not sacred potency alone, the effect of the Calvinist reorientation was not restricted to the realm of theological definition. It influenced the way ordinary men and women conceived of political power, interpreted their social world, and established the relation between the sacred and society. The principal means for achieving this reorientation was a reinterpretation of what is involved in the process of signification.⁵

Elwood goes on to argue that Calvin took particular issue with the notion that the sign (the bread) becomes the real matter of the sacrament (the true, physical body of Christ). In Calvin's view, this

⁴ Christopher Elwood, *The Body Broken: The Calvinist Doctrine of the Eucharist and the Symbolization of Power in France* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁵ Elwood, 4.

confusion leads to a dangerous consolidation of divine power in particular material sites, a claim that carries not only problematic religious but also political implications. Elwood explains this as follows:

What does it mean to speak of a physical object becoming the sign of something else? What kind of relation between sign and signified is established by virtue of the signifying function? What kind of capacity, virtue, or power can be properly assigned to something that operates as a signifier? In what sense can a sign be said to make its referent present, and what kind of presence might such signification entail? ...This language and these questions furnished the means by which people determined and specified the nature of their access to God and their participation in the redeeming and sanctifying power that mediated salvation. Laypeople had a large stake in the outcome of this kind of questioning. But the interests of ordinary people in the question of the sacrament's symbolizing capacity extended also into the realm of social or political affairs. The eucharistic symbol, after all, had served to represent the unity and the ordered and integrated wholeness of both the Christian and the political community as it established and reinforced social and political hierarchies. As a social symbol reflecting as well as governing the social disposition of power, the eucharist was likely to become the focus of practically every member of society with an interest in negotiating her role within the social network of power.⁶

Elwood argues that if sign and signified become collapsed in the material of the bread and through the mediation of the priest, this secures a more general pattern of thought in which divine power, or the locus of the sacred, is concentrated in particular material locations—hence, idolatry.

It would not be a stretch, especially given the social structure of French society at the time, for an average person to associate the rightful authority of priestly power—a power that controls the ontological touchstone between God and the world—with the authority of a French monarchy that would claim the absolute power to manage earthly affairs.⁷ Calvin's theorization of sacramental signification could thus be read as undermining the sublimated notion that divine power is associated with particular, privileged earthly locations. By claiming that the symbol of the bread points to the body

⁶ Elwood, 166.

⁷ While Elwood does not think that this association had to be explicit in the minds of French subjects in order for it to have been operative (167), he argues for this association historically in several ways, including the following: an analysis of how the Corpus Christi parades reinforced a logic of absolutism (21-6); the practice of the royal touch and the rhetoric around Henry of Navarre (170); and the easy symbolic reciprocity that developed (when unchallenged) between the acclamation of God as king and the king as the absolute authority (158).

of Christ in heaven, and that any claim to the contrary not only undermines the humanity of Christ but also risks idolatry, Calvin not only challenges what he sees as the corrupted power of the church but also (in principle) the absolutist monarchy as well.⁸ According to Elwood, the political force of Calvin's theory of sacramental signification is that he maintains a dialectical relationship between transcendence and immanence. Because the sacraments obtain relationally—through the analogical interplay of similarity and difference, presence and absence, Creator and created, controlled by the work of Word and Spirit—the sacraments do not effect, but rather *subvert* a collapse between heaven and earth. As such, "The critical assault of the Reformed thus called into question the entire medieval Catholic symbolic structure that posited a stable relation of corporal and divine orders."⁹ It thus became important for followers of the early Reformed faith to deny that divine power could be rightfully located in any certain physical location, and instead to cultivate practices of rightly maintaining the proper kind of analogy between the physical and the spiritual.¹⁰

Understanding the "true" nature of the sacraments (from Calvin's perspective) thus becomes crucial for more than merely arcane or confessional reasons. Christ's institution of the Lord's Supper becomes the privileged activity through which Christians can most tangibly apprehend the relationship of God to the world. If the incarnation fundamentally persuades receptive human beings of God's love,¹¹ then the repeated practice of the sacraments teaches the church, through the work of the Spirit,

⁸ Elwood, 166-7.

⁹ Elwood, 169.

¹⁰ Elwood, 63.

¹¹ There is one striking passage in book two that explicitly relies on the rhetorically persuasive character of the incarnation-atonement narrative.

For example, suppose someone is told: "If God hated you while you were still a sinner, and cast you off, as you deserved, a terrible destruction would have awaited you. But because he kept you in grace voluntarily, and of his own free favor, and did not allow you to be estranged from him, he thus delivered you from that peril." This person will then surely experience and feel something of what he owes to God's mercy. On the other hand, suppose he learns, as Scripture teaches, that he was estranged from God

to understand the nature of God's activity with respect to the world more generally. Calvin writes that "Christ is the matter or (if you prefer) the substance of all the sacraments; for in him they have all their firmness, and they do not promise anything apart from him."¹² Yet the benefit of the sacrament is precisely in realizing the implications of this promise—not merely that Christ is present in the elements, but that the work of the incarnation represented in the Eucharist has wider, spiritually-activated aims within the Christian life.

The analogy of the Eucharist does not locate Christ in the bread. Rather, it promises that through the tangible sign of the bread, God's relation to the world can be once more perceived by the body of believers sewn together into a spiritual body of Christ by the work of the Spirit. Recall these passages which I noted in chapter five:

We are taught from the Scriptures that Christ was from the beginning the life-giving Word of the Father, the spring and source of life, from which all things have always received their capacity to live. Therefore, John sometimes calls him "the Word of life"... meaning that he, flowing even into all creatures, instilled in them the power to breathe and live.... But when the Source of life

through sin, is an heir of wrath, subject to the curse of eternal death, excluded from all hope of salvation, beyond every blessing of God, the slave of Satan, captive under the yoke of sin, destined finally for a dreadful destruction and already involved in it; and that at this point Christ interceded as his advocate, took upon himself and suffered the punishment that, from God's righteous judgment, threatened all sinners; that he purged with his blood those evils which had rendered sinners hateful to God; that by this expiation he made satisfaction and sacrifice duly to God the Father; that as intercessor he has appeased God's wrath; that on this foundation rests the peace of God with humans; that by this bond his benevolence is maintained toward them. Will the person not then be even more moved by all these things which so vividly portray the greatness of the calamity from which he has been so rescued?

To sum up: since our hearts cannot, in God's mercy, either seize upon life ardently enough or accept it with the gratefulness we owe, unless our minds are first struck and overwhelmed by fear of God's wrath and by dread of eternal death, we are taught by Scripture to perceive that apart from Christ, God is, so to speak, hostile to us, and his hand is armed for our destruction; to embrace his benevolence and fatherly love in Christ alone (*Institutes* 2.16.2).

¹² *Institutes*, 4.14.16.

begins to abide in our flesh, he no longer lies hidden far from us, but shows us that we are to partake of him.¹³

Now, that sacred partaking of his flesh and blood, by which Christ pours his life into us, *as if* it penetrated into our bones and marrow, he also testifies and seals in the Supper—not by presenting a vain and empty sign, but by manifesting there the effectiveness of his Spirit to fulfill what he promises.¹⁴

The effectiveness of the sacrament simultaneously assures a believer of her participation in Christ's body and secures the practice of realizing the promise of life in a more general sense—a life that undergirds all of creation itself.

When one recalls that Calvin's anxiety over the Eucharist was the early catalyst for his efforts at reform, certain elements of his written arguments appear differently. For example, a reader can better understand why Calvin foregrounds idolatry as the chief manifestation of sin, for idolatry is the wrongful association of some created thing with divine power. If Calvin can argue that the human tendency toward idolatry as the chief visible manifestation of the fall, then he can construct a larger account of how even the church might be vulnerable to this tendency—even within its most sacred activities.¹⁵ This also elucidates why scripture assumes such importance for Calvin.¹⁶ If sacramental signification is analogical, then the words we use to grasp the analogical relation between different kinds of matter (Christ's body and bread, for example) are important. It matters, in other words, that we grasp the narrative in the right way in order to understand *how* God relates to material bodies. Related to this, cognition also moves to the foreground—not as the only means by which a relationship with God may be achieved, but as a human capacity that plays a key role alongside perception and affection in

¹³ *Institutes*, 4.17.8.

¹⁴ *Institutes*, 4.17.10.

¹⁵ For more, see chapter four.

¹⁶ While the emphasis on scripture was a common feature of the various movements of reform, catchphrases like *sola scriptura* can obscure the particular reasons why various reformers elevated scriptural authority.

disciplining the human ability for this particular kind of participation in God. As I argued in chapter five, for Calvin participation is relational rather than ontological; it is effected by receiving divinely-given names that dispose the self in the world.¹⁷ Along these lines, Calvin's critical preoccupation with the sacraments and their relation to power also sheds light on certain structural aspects of the 1559 *Institutes* which I discussed in chapter three, such as the fact that the *Institutes* is a work of theology bookended by political concerns. Calvin's 1536 letter to King Francis precedes the opening of the project, while his closing chapter on Civil Authority follows only after a lengthy discussion of the sacraments. Finally, I would argue that Calvin's overriding concern about divine power also clarifies why Calvin places such an emphasis on the priority of God in the doctrine of providence. This last claim, however, will require some further unpacking.

2.

With Elwood's argument in view, it is possible to orient my work in the last three chapters as an argument about how Calvin's doctrine of providence undergirds and advances the theological, political, and ethical concerns that are central to Calvin's critique of sacramental theology. In conclusion, I want to suggest that providence plays a crucial role in positively restructuring the symbolism of power within Calvin's thought. If Calvin wants to undercut the view that divine power inheres in particular earthly locations, then the strong emphasis he gives to providence may be read to account for God's relation to creation in the absence of the Church's sacramental landscape. In other words, while Calvin wants to evacuate the physical presence of Christ from the sacraments for various reasons—including concerns over maintaining divine freedom while undermining idolatry—he wants at the same time to assert the goodness and importance of creation as such.

¹⁷ For more on Calvin's view of participation, see, once again, Julie Canlis' *Calvin's Ladder* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010) and J. Todd Billings' *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

I have shown repeated instances in which Calvin's theological arguments engage and affirm created life as such. In book one, creation is depicted as the site of the glory of God, a truth obscured by the fall (and by subsequent idolatry) but gradually restored through various accommodations provided by God's grace, including the clarification of scripture. In book two, readers are reminded that "the natural order was that the frame of the universe should be the school in which we were to learn piety" and that the preaching of the Word promises to restore this relation to our Maker.¹⁸ I have also shown various places in which the material features of embodied life are affirmed as playing a legitimate and even central role in Christian formation. We see this in the exercise of prayer,¹⁹ in how Calvin discusses affective responses to suffering,²⁰ and not least in the key role materiality plays with respect to the Eucharistic signs themselves.²¹ There is an ongoing insistence across the *Institutes* that although God is removed from any special location, this only heightens the sense in which God is active within *all* of creation. That is, by evacuating the divine presence ontologically from creation, it is not only God's freedom that is maintained. Calvin also argues that creation *as a whole* is freed to respond to and participate in divine activity. If God is not located in any special place, then all places and things have the potential to operate as sites in which the analogy between words and things can be realized.

This may seem to be a paradoxical claim. After all, removing God's sacramental presence from ordinary life—whether in the consecrated elements through transubstantiation or, as Luther would argue, as hidden in, with, and under ordinary things more generally²²—would seem to evacuate the

¹⁸ *Institutes*, 2.6.1. While the line quoted refers to the original significance of the universe which was disrupted by the fall, the end of the passage suggests that the work of Christ is in part to enable this relation. This passage was discussed at further length in chapters four and five.

¹⁹ See chapter five and *Institutes* 3.20, especially 1-6.

²⁰ See chapter five and *Institutes* 3.8.9-10.

²¹ See chapter five and *Institutes* 4.17.10.

²² I am referring to the connection one can draw between Luther's *sub contrario* and his Eucharistic view of the sacramental presence.

world of the sacred. Furthermore, when assessing the legacy of Calvinism, one might well want to argue that it is precisely the outcome of such a move. Removing the sacramental presence from the world would seem to fit elegantly not only with Weber's disenchantment thesis,²³ but with a number of arguments about secularization. Blumenberg, Gauchet, Taylor, and Gillespie all in different ways argue that God's distance from the world correlates with two particular features of modernity: (a) the immanent world's increasing importance on its own terms (Blumenberg's "turn to immanence") and (b) human beings' "freedom," or attitude of mastery with respect to changing the world, rather than resigning themselves to its necessities.

Yet when detailed attention is given to Calvin's arguments, as I have sought to do, it becomes apparent that Calvin not only agrees with the correlation between God's distance and the world's importance, but explicitly forwards it. That is, the connection between God's distance, the world's importance, and increased attention to human activity is not merely a revisionist reading of Calvin—though he presents this argument, of course, with some crucial differences. In the paragraphs that follow, I compare Gauchet's argument concerning secularization with Calvin's position. After this, I gradually expand the discussion to include interlocutors which I first discussed in chapter one. My aim is to provide an assessment of how Calvin's arguments positively restructure meaning and order in the absence of an ontology of divine presence, and to give a concluding argument for the significance of providence.

In chapter one, I discussed Gauchet's claim that the Protestant emphasis on God's transcendence, in removing God (ontologically) from the world, does not threaten human freedom but actually establishes the possibility for a new and more robust understanding of human freedom. A God who is "other" to the world suggests a world with a kind of metaphysical indeterminacy, and invites

²³ Elwood similarly makes this connection on p. 170.

human beings to engage the world rationally instead of merely seeking participation in immanence or unity with nature (in Gauchet's terms). However, as I began to argue in chapter one, Gauchet's specific description of this process as a turn *from* religion *to* disenchanted, rationalized responsibility relies on some assumptions that must be called into question when one attends to Calvin's writing and its influence. For Gauchet, the religion that has been conceptually eradicated in the modern West is defined as the desire for dispossession by immanence—desire, as he puts it, to become one with nature.²⁴ Religion, in Calvin's account, is born of piety—"that reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of his benefits induces."²⁵ It is thus a relation *to* nature mediated through a set of signs given to provide a knowledge of God that is ultimately realized in its usefulness and benefit.²⁶ Calvin understands religion to emerge from a person's pious engagement in the fundamentally Trinitarian relationship between creation, Word, and participation through the Spirit.

On one level, this may merely be a matter of two very different authors using religion differently and for different ends. Yet it is worth asking what is at stake in these different approaches to such a shifting but common category, and ultimately what becomes of Gauchet's argument if one can find traces of Calvin's notion of religion operative within the modern West. Gauchet's definition of religion funds his ability to tell a "political history of religion" as an etiology for the structure of modern democracy. It is striking, then, to see that a work of theology written during the early modern period, one that both manifests many of the features Gauchet pinpoints while advancing a crucially different notion of religion, refuses to separate a kind of immanent participation from the importance of symbolic or narrative mediation.

²⁴ Gauchet, *Disenchantment*, 33-7.

²⁵ *Institutes*, 1.2.1.

²⁶ This may illumine Calvin's surprising willingness to allow that "nature is God," provided the claim is made piously. See *Institutes* 1.5.5.

Recall, from chapter one, that Gauchet's argument for the reincorporation of the political in democratic institutions relies on the claim that religion, as Gauchet defines it, has completely evacuated the world. Transcendence—the vehicle of religion's evacuation—has accordingly been reimplanted into the world, specifically into the human subject as conceived in a broadly democratic framework. If each human being is seen to be other than every other, then democratic institutions are designed to mediate the discourses that undergird the possibility of political responsibility across difference. Because Gauchet argues that difference now obtains at the center of human consciousness, he is therefore able to dismiss immanent participation from the range of modern conceptual possibilities while retaining transcendence.²⁷

Yet, when Gauchet considers whether there may be elements of religion (*qua* participation) that remain in the modern West outside of sectarian pockets,²⁸ he turns to the aesthetic. Observe, once more Gauchet's description of the aesthetic, and particularly note how it retains that almost-lost power to re-orient the subject with respect to the immanent world and thus foster a kind of immanent participation in something larger than the self: "the vertigo of the musical abyss, the poignant heights of poetry, the frantic passion of novelistic intrigue, a dreamlike absorption into the image" as well as "the open-ended attempt to evoke the other deep inside the familiar... the unfathomable 'hidden world' uncovered in the midst of a landscape seen a hundred times before, the impressionists' magic revelation of the deeply hidden truth of an inhabited landscape."²⁹ Within Gauchet's account, the possibility for these experiences signal vestigial traces of a religious past, something akin to the still-visible light from a

²⁷ As I discuss in chapter one, this contrasts with Blumenberg, who more strictly characterizes modernity as a rejection of transcendence and a turn toward immanence.

²⁸ One might well ask why so-called sectarian pockets are so easily dismissed. This would, in fact, be another way to criticize Gauchet's claims.

²⁹ *DW*, 203, 204.

star that has already burned out. In this way, such aesthetic experiences are impotent, or even dangerous with respect to the political sphere of collective responsibility.

Calvin's arguments are interesting against this conceptual backdrop in that he seems to think that transcendence operates not *primarily* to found rational discourse, but rather to establish a better kind of immanent participation by recourse to practices that employ rational discourses alongside the aesthetic—words *as* symbols and signs, material things *as* “divine art” when seen in their relation to God.³⁰ In short, transcendence itself becomes operative in a field mediated by relationships of affect, perception, and cognition. So while Calvin's critique of the sacramentality of the world looks strikingly like the kind of sacred withdrawal that Gauchet narrates as constitutive of the world's freedom, Calvin's reintroduction of the sacredness of the world through the signification of God's relationship to it recalls aspects of Gauchet's description of the aesthetic.³¹ However, it locates this experience as only one component within a larger religious domain. In a way that is resonant with Gauchet's story, Calvin insists that the rhetoric of transcendence (exhibited, for example, in providence) ought not to threaten the human perception of one's own freedom, but rather set the conditions through which humanity can begin to assume an active relationship to transcendence.³²

Calvin, however, sees repetitive practices of sacramental signification and engagement with Christian narrative—practices that are, but are not *solely* cognitive or rational—as constitutive of this relationship. These practices of relating signs to created things will, in effect, overwhelm the subject; they will render the world differently and suggest depths that are in some respects hidden. This “aesthetic experience” is designed, however, to operate in conjunction with a range of practices that

³⁰ Calvin frequently invokes the category of art to refer to creation in *Institutes* 1.5.

³¹ This relationship is symbolized in the sacraments, secured through the narrative of incarnation, effected by the Spirit in the community, and undergirded by the narrative of providence.

³² The poverty of the knowledge of ourselves leads to our need to pursue the knowledge of God (*Institutes* 1.1-2).

might engage variously be aimed at engaging cognition—practices such as reading, preaching, determining, relating, and naming. Transcendence, in Calvin’s view, operates precisely by figuring immanence and thus allowing for a kind of guided participation in immanence through Christ. If one returns to Gauchet after glimpsing how these features are related theologically by Calvin, one may not only wonder what is left out by Gauchet’s definition of religion, but also what is left out by his failure to attend to democracy itself as a form of practice—and whether he too easily dismisses the role of participation in modern life.

3.

If, at the same time, one is interested in mapping the dynamics of Calvin’s political symbolism, Gauchet’s predecessors, Lefort and Kantorowicz, present much more interesting interlocutors. I will only sketch the resonances between these authors, beginning with Lefort and moving quickly to Kantorowicz. One important distinction between Lefort and Gauchet has to do with whether power in modern democracy is fundamentally disincorporated (Lefort) or reincorporated in a strictly disenchanted sense (Gauchet).³³ Calvin’s critique of the Eucharist is likewise an argument for the disincorporation of power—with respect, at least, to worldly life. Additionally, like Lefort’s account, Calvin emphasizes the effectiveness of the symbolic in managing disincorporated power. Lefort describes this dynamic as follows:

I have for a long time concentrated upon this peculiarity of modern democracy: of all the regimes of which we know, it is the only one to have represented power in such a way as to show that power is an empty place and to have thereby maintained a gap between the symbolic and the real. It does so by virtue of a discourse which reveals that power belongs to no one; that those who exercise power do not possess it; that they do not, indeed, embody it; that the

³³ Gauchet, *DW*, 3.

exercise of power requires a periodic and repeated contest; that the authority of those vested with power is created and re-created as a result of the manifestation of the will of the people.³⁴

At least three features, largely absent in Gauchet, rise to the fore in Lefort's account of modern political power. First, there is an assertion of the importance of the aesthetic in and for conceiving the political; second, there is a sense in which disincorporated power is never fully reincorporated, but is temporarily reincorporated in different collective arrangements (an incorporation Lefort hopes can be *disrupted* by the symbolic as much as it is constituted by it). And finally, Lefort sees the symbolic as not only aesthetic but also repetitive in quality, and thus as becoming meaningful within a sphere of iterative practices that relate symbols to arrangements of bodies, thus performing the kind of impermanent incorporation of power that he envisions.

These features also tie Lefort's discussion to Kantorowicz, whose work on the relationship between literature and politics in "The Sovereignty of the Artist" and *The King's Two Bodies* are relevant for elucidating how the symbolic manages relationships of power in Calvin's Eucharistic theory.³⁵ In "Sovereignty," Kantorowicz notes a shift in medieval Christian views of art in which art is seen as not only imitative of nature but as effecting new arrangements and forms of nature. He thus lifts up the category of the fictive (originally deployed with respect to legal fictions) as both exerting creative force and claiming to imitate the natural order. The problem of the king's two bodies follows this tension: the king is a mortal person while the office of the king renders the king a *persona ficta*, a legal fiction that by definition can never die.³⁶ In this sense, the fiction comes to hold primary power, both ordering and

³⁴ Lefort, "The Permanence of the Theologico-Political?" in *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans. David Macey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 225. Emphasis in original.

³⁵ Ernst H. Kantorowicz, "The Sovereignty of the Artist: A Note on Legal Maxims and Renaissance Theories of Art," in *De Artibus Opuscula XL: Essays in Honor of Panofsky*, ed. Millard Meiss (New York: New York University Press, 1961): 267-79; *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 1985.

³⁶ *The King's Two Bodies*, 4.

performing a reality to which human particulars become subject. To use the terms on which I relied in chapters one and two to characterize the relationship between providence and meaning, this fiction—this form of writing, of art—renders the world meaningful by ordering its significance in a particular way.³⁷

With Calvin's critique of the local presence, the priority of the two bodies is flipped and altered, primarily because Jesus' body is both human and unlike any other. The particular human body of Christ thus assumes priority, anchoring and regulating the symbolism, which then continually constitutes and reconstitutes the abstract unity of the church as the body of Christ on earth. In a sense, then, the abstract unity constantly points to a physical and mortal, if resurrected and ascended, body; and it is around this body that the participation of other mortal bodies is organized. Furthermore, this relation is both effected and regulated by a particular *kind* of narrative. Once again, it matters that the story is particular and that it is told in a certain way. For example, it is not enough to simply assert that God exists, that the incarnation occurred, or that Christ's body lives. The world is represented through the particularity of the narrative, just as the abstract unity of the body of Christ is represented through the particularity of Christ's body. Christ's actual body, or divine activity, is therefore both particular and effected by means of the fictive: it is through a narrative and its relation to a material symbol that a believer is able to assume her participation in immanent life. This pattern likewise connects to providence in Calvin's account. As I argued in chapter five, Calvin frames providence as both general and special, but prioritizes special providence (so, once more, particular stories about or signs of God's providential activity) as prior to any legitimate generalization of how providence works.

³⁷ I closed chapter two by suggesting that although the two forms of meaning (intention vs. signification) should be conceptually distinguished, they can both operate alongside each other in a given narrative. For example, Augustine or Calvin may refer to providence as God's intention with respect to the world's events, but may also emphasize that the human meaning of these claims is not lodged in the outcome of this intention but in how God's providence is seen to signify the order of the world in the present. Along these lines, one can see that the fiction of the office of the king may be connected to a form of intentionality connected to the person of the king, but simultaneously structuring a world that can be meaningfully navigated by subjects of the king.

This leads to the second (and third) of Lefort's claims, that political power is only temporarily incarnated in a process mediated by the symbolic. With Calvin's theory of the sacraments, power always originates in the absent yet particular body of Christ, which then performs the general unity of the church (through the Spirit) by means of the symbol (the bread and wine) received in faith and love (confidence in the Word and among the community). Again, this activity echoes the wider dynamics of providence.³⁸ With providence, power originates in the apparently-absent yet particular creative and providential activity of God that secures the sense in which providence can be seen as general. Once more, the particular disposition of God's providential activity is crucial. It matters, for example, that God affirms intermediaries, just as it matters that Christ becomes present through the bread and the wine, because these orient a believer toward the importance of intermediaries and ordinary things that sustain our physical life. They are affirmed by God's will, according to Calvin, as well as inferentially by the force of the analogy that God's words animate between physical things and spiritual things.

Furthermore, I have argued, to some extent echoing Gerrish's *Grace and Gratitude*, that Calvin affirms the world particularly by an exercise of re-naming—by naming God as Creator and Father, the world as a good creation, and human beings as children of God.³⁹ This repetitive cycle of affirmation and re-orientation through attribution undergirds the sense in which divine power remains ultimately disincorporated, yet always related to the world.⁴⁰ While Calvin thinks that God's providence operates

³⁸ It would be interesting to explore this further in the context of widespread views of the artist as divine creator that came to the fore during the renaissance, Calvin's critique of transubstantiation can be seen to return the creative force of art to God and the divine narrative authored by Christ's incarnation and scripture. On the other hand, inasmuch as this connects to the wider frame of providence in Calvin's writing, the relationship between art and nature is reconstituted, yet once again flipped. God's *creatio ex nihilo* orders nature while God's providence affirms and orders it; divine signs, given by grace to human beings, do not properly imitate nature, but reveal the significance of nature as a significance secured through God's providential relation.

³⁹ This dynamic was discussed at length in chapter five.

⁴⁰ Calvin's insistence that our knowledge of God is always related to the realm of our experience is apparent in a number of areas, one of which is the following:

specially and uses certain instruments in particular ways that could be seen as the temporary incorporation of divine power—Pharaoh may present such an example⁴¹—creation is ordinarily affirmed precisely by pointing away from itself to divine power. That is, the legitimacy of the immanent world results from God’s activity, not from its independent power. What the world attains is not power, but glory. It is not the body of the king, but the clothes.⁴²

4.

As I discussed in chapter one, Giorgio Agamben is similarly concerned with the organization of power within modern democracy and its relation to theology, yet he approaches the question differently. Like Lefort, Agamben argues ultimately that the “center” of democratic power is vacant. That is, power is not located in any one immanent location but is, in Agamben’s view, constituted by the activity of bureaucracy and economy for which providence (rather than sovereignty) is the relevant paradigm. Unlike Lefort, however, Agamben is particularly concerned with the larger implications of the theologico-political as a paradigm for ordering life. That is, he is concerned with larger implications of the assumption that symbolic activity operates under the auspices of the political, and the extent to which this actually reinforces a form of power in which all forms of life and death are subsumed under the management of bureaucracy, economy, and law. Rather than rehearsing Agamben’s argument

What help is it... to know [*cognoscere*] a God with whom we have nothing to do? Rather, our knowledge [*notitia*] should serve first to teach [*instituat*] us fear and reverence; secondly, with it as our guide and teacher, we should learn to seek every good thing from him, and having received it, to credit it to his account (1.2.2).

⁴¹ Calvin discusses Pharaoh in 1.18.2. Much more could be said about the case of Pharaoh, not only in Calvin’s writing but across the Christian tradition and not least in early Greek and Latin writings. For Calvin’s purposes, however, it is interesting because while divine power is incorporated in Pharaoh’s activities, this case in particular resists the idea that the temporary incorporation of divine power should be identified with the legitimate operation of earthly power. While this raises a number of additional questions, it can be interpreted as another way of undermining the logic of absolutism and sanctioning the forms of “legitimate” resistance that Calvin suggests at the end of book four.

⁴² “God’s providence does not always meet us in its naked form, but God in a sense clothes it with the means employed” (*Institutes*, 1.17.4).

about providence, I will focus here on how he concludes his study by connecting the signature of providence to the signature of glory. This is a particularly salient relation with respect to examining the structure of power that is implicit in Calvin work, one in which the rhetoric of “glory” plays a significant role. I will show that while Agamben’s critical view of democracy can mobilize critical appraisals of the form of power that emerges from Calvin’s writing, it is also the case that Calvin frames glory in ways that are crucially different from Agamben’s study.

Agamben’s discussion of glory emerges from a long chain of exegesis and argument through which he flips a number of familiar pairings having to do with the categories of being and activity. He thus asserts, through a close reading of several early Christian texts, that the Son’s activity actually *constitutes* the Father’s power,⁴³ and thus that providence (economy) constitutes sovereignty (rule), and government constitutes the kingdom. For each respective pairing, the latter (for example, the kingdom) is rendered void in the absence of the former (the government).⁴⁴ Agamben then notes that, beginning with the Father and Son, the point of cleavage between each of these pairs is consistently characterized by glory. That is, the Son’s activity is figured as “the glory of the Father,” who otherwise neither acts nor appears.⁴⁵ At one point, Agamben refers to glory as a signature—related but not identical to the signature of providence—and thus characterizes it as follows:

Glory is precisely the place at which this bilateral (or bi-univocal) character of the relation between theology and politics clearly emerges into the light.... More original—or better, more decisive—than the opposition between theology and politics, spiritual power and profane power, is the glory within which they coincide.... Thomas Mann observes that... religion and politics are not two fundamentally distinct things but that, on the contrary, they “exchange clothes.” It is possible, however, that this exchange can take place only because underneath the garments there are no body and no substance. Theology and politics are, in this sense, what

⁴³ As I discussed in chapter one, this relies to some extent on Agamben’s questionable interpretation of the Son’s being called “*anarchos*” with respect to the Father in early Christian writings.

⁴⁴ For more on this, see my discussion of Agamben in chapter one.

⁴⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 201-9.

results from the exchange and from the movement of something like an absolute garment that, as such, has decisive juridical-political implications. Like many of the concepts we have encountered in our investigation, this garment of glory is a signature that marks bodies and substances politically and theologically, and orientates and displaces them according to an economy that we are only now beginning to glimpse.⁴⁶

Glory therefore functions as a kind of unilaterally directed praise and affirmation (hallelujah, amen)⁴⁷ that acclaims a power which itself never discloses. In fact, it acclaims it *by* covering it.⁴⁸

In a sense, this is not a radical insight, but one taken for granted across the traceable discourse on glory in Jewish and Christian thought. Agamben shows that glory has long been linked with that which is beyond being and language—with the inoperativity of transcendence, the Sabbath rest, God’s activity before creation and at providence’s consummation.⁴⁹ The burden of the argument, then, is for Agamben to show how this form of glory became linked to political power, and more specifically honed (rather than discarded) within democratic power. He writes,

Glory, both in theology and politics, is precisely what takes the place of that unthinkable emptiness that amounts to the inoperativity of power. And yet, precisely this unsayable vacuity is what nourishes and feeds power (or, rather, what the machine of power transforms into nourishment). That means that the center of the governmental apparatus, the threshold at which Kingdom and Government ceaselessly communicate and ceaselessly distinguish themselves from one another is, in reality, empty; it is only the Sabbath and *katapausis* [rest]—and, nevertheless, this inoperativity is so essential for the machine that it must at all costs be adopted and maintained at its center in the form of glory.⁵⁰

Glory therefore functions as a signature that connects theology and politics because it is linked inextricably to the question of the intangible existence of power. Inasmuch as politics craves power, it employs techniques of glorification to attain and solidify it.

⁴⁶ Agamben, *KG*, 193-4.

⁴⁷ See *KG*, 231.

⁴⁸ Or, to put the insight in simpler terms, one might say Agamben’s claim is that “the emperor has *only* clothes.”

⁴⁹ *KG*, 242.

⁵⁰ *KG*, 242.

In order to take this argument one step further and connect it to democratic power, Agamben re-states his argument in the language of *zōē* (natural life) and *bios* (a particular form of life), terms which cut across his *homo sacer* project as a whole. Here and in other books, Agamben argues that the modern West is fundamentally marked by the ways in which it brings both natural life and particular forms of life under the auspices of the political and its economy, laws, and bureaucratic management.⁵¹ He reiterates this claim near the end of *The Kingdom and the Glory*, writing,

The political is neither a *bios* nor a *zōē*, but the dimension that the inoperativity of contemplation, by deactivating linguistic and corporeal, material and immaterial praxes, ceaselessly opens and assigns to the living. For this reason, from the perspective of theological *oikonomia* the genealogy of which we have here traced, nothing is more urgent than to incorporate inoperativity within its own apparatuses. *Zōē aiōnios*, eternal life, is the name of this inoperative center of the human, of this political “substance” of the Occident that the machine of the economy and of glory ceaselessly attempts to capture within itself.⁵²

In other words, for the political to maintain its power, it must incorporate the contemplative that properly exceeds it precisely into its own operations. By tracing a relationship between power and government mediated by glory in early Christian literature, Agamben thus finds a pattern through which political life legibly engages and thus absorbs the natural life that had excluded and exceeded it.⁵³

Agamben’s account concludes with a concrete depiction of democracy as the form of government in which “the consent of the governed” functions as a totalizing form of acclamation, that constitutes a kind of inescapable inoperativity of political power:

Consensus can be defined without difficulty, paraphrasing Schmitt’s thesis on public opinion, as the “modern form of acclamation. In any case, consensual democracy, which Debord called

⁵¹ He links this movement to the foreclosing of contemplation, which is prior to, gives birth to, but also remains outside of the political proper. See *KG*, 250-2.

⁵² *KG*, 251.

⁵³ In one sense, this suggests a kind of secularization—the movement of transcendence (or otherness) into an immanent frame (the political machine); but the point for Agamben is that, by means of the signature of glory, this is also a theologization of the secular.

“the society of the spectacle” and which is so dear to the theorists of communicative action, is a glorious democracy, in which the oikonomia is fully resolved into glory and the doxological function, freeing itself of liturgy and ceremonials, absolutizes itself to an unheard of extent and penetrates every area of social life.⁵⁴

Agamben’s study of providence as a backdrop for what culminates as a study of glory and “a theological genealogy of economy and government”⁵⁵ thus ends with an almost Weberian pessimism. Agamben argues that democracy retains and even extends a totalizing grasp over life and death whether or not one views it as fully disenchanted (Gauchet) or as maintaining a potentially-productive relationship to theological symbolism (Lefort). That is, in spite of the surface disenchantment associated with democracy, its disavowal of “liturgy and ceremonials” do not signal a disavowal of glory but rather the quiet superimposition of the function of glory over all of life, over “the people” in general. In other words, democracy’s austere glory signals the extent to which democratic practices have become the governors of *bios* and *zōē* alike. Agamben concludes that “to think politics—beyond the economy and beyond glory—beginning from the inoperative disarticulation of both of *bios* and *zōē*, is the task for a future investigation.”⁵⁶ His task in *The Kingdom and the Glory*, it seems, is to show that neither a political theology in the Schmittian tradition nor democracy is capable of forwarding a critical politics.

With Agamben’s argument in view, one might very well return to Elwood’s description of Calvin’s critique of power—and my argument about the dynamics of providence—with a different, and perhaps more troubled view. Even if one can be persuaded that Calvin’s resistance to sacramental power presents a critique of absolutism that contributes (if unintentionally) to democratic thinking, Agamben would argue that such a theology does not eliminate but rather expands the logic of absolutism. Inasmuch as Calvin removes the locus of divine power from specialized locations and

⁵⁴ *KG*, 259.

⁵⁵ This is the book’s subtitle.

⁵⁶ *KG*, 259.

relates the entire “frame of the universe” to divine activity by means of will and signification, Calvin might merely be subsuming all of creation under an absent divine power mediated by divine words and laws. In addition, the claim that Calvin opens a space for aesthetic mediation that offsets the rationalized disenchantment of Gauchet’s democracy does not address Agamben’s concerns. Agamben argues, after all, that this form of political power is constituted precisely by the repetitive aesthetic activity that is entailed in glorification. While Agamben never addresses the Protestant reforms in any detail, he suggests almost in passing that the overall de-aestheticization (iconoclasm and rationalism) of Protestantism engineered the very transmogrification of the scope of power to one in which glory takes the form of the public acclamation of consent.⁵⁷ There are reasons—both in Calvin’s writing and in the varied legacy of Reformed theology and its political associations—to take this account seriously.

It is helpful, in fact, to bring Agamben’s study of glory to Calvin’s text in order to provide more critical clarity to a discussion of Calvin’s deployment of glory. In general, Calvin refers to glory early and often returns to it—yet not quite in the manner that it is used in the other writings that Agamben cites. Calvin tends to associate glory not with absent, transcendent power *per se*—not with rest or inoperativity, or even with the language of acclamation. Rather, the language that reveals glory is consistently the language of attribution and narrative; it is the language that recounts how God’s love is given through Christ and declares that God is creator and a Father to those whom God loves. Glory itself becomes visible when this relationship is understood and performed; when this happens glory is consistently linked to the immanent creation. It is a mark or sign of creation’s very createdness properly understood and perceived.

⁵⁷ KG, 197.

Calvin thus writes that “wherever you cast your eyes, there is no spot in the universe wherein you cannot discern at least some sparks of God’s glory.”⁵⁸ He argues that it is a tragedy of sin that “most people, immersed in their own errors, are struck blind in such a dazzling theater... and certainly however much the glory of God shines forth, scarcely one person in a hundred is a true spectator of it!”⁵⁹ Glory is thus related to creation in a way that can be perceived, in Calvin’s terms with the inborn sense of the divine [*sensus divinitatis*]. Even fallen perception sees enough glory in creation to know that something exceeds its grasp. In another place, Calvin writes,

If there is no need to go outside ourselves to comprehend God, what pardon will the indolence of that one deserve who is loath to descend within himself to find God? For the same reason, David, when he has briefly praised the admirable name and glory of God, which shine everywhere, immediately exclaims: “What are human beings that thou art mindful of them?” Likewise, “Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings thou hast established strength.” Indeed, he not only declares that a clear mirror of God’s works is in humankind, but that infants, while they nurse at their mother’s breasts, have tongues so eloquent to preach his glory that there is no need at all of other orators.... Indeed, no one gives oneself freely and willingly to God’s service unless, having tasted God’s fatherly love, one is drawn to love and worship God in return.⁶⁰

Finally, recall that one of Calvin’s uses of the labyrinth image (see chapter three) has precisely to do with the way human beings navigate the flickering perception of glory through fallen senses, and with the end goal of not only perception, but contemplation:

It is therefore clear that God has provided the assistance of the Word for the sake of all those to whom he has been pleased to give useful instruction because he foresaw that his likeness imprinted upon the most beautiful form of the universe would be insufficiently effective. Hence, we must strive onward by this straight path if we seriously aspire to the pure contemplation of God. We must come, I say, to the Word, where God is truly and vividly described to us from God’s works.... For we should so reason that the splendor of the divine countenance, which even the apostle calls “unapproachable,” is for us like an inexplicable

⁵⁸ *Institutes*, 1.5.1.

⁵⁹ *Institutes*, 1.5.8.

⁶⁰ *Institutes* 1.5.3.

labyrinth unless we are conducted into it by the thread of the Word; so that it is better to limp along this path than to dash with all speed outside it.⁶¹

It is striking that glory and its related imagery—splendor, shining, light, dazzling, brightness—is consistently used by Calvin to refer to the relationship between God and the realm of creation; it is treated as a *de facto* relation of which human beings may attain perception through grace and by exercises—by learning to read and to name—and not merely through the inoperative language of acclamation. Furthermore, the various words used in association with glory, such as shining and dazzling, nearly always refer adjectivally to the materiality of the creation itself inasmuch as it points back to the Creator.

This is yet another way in which the dynamics of providence, which teaches and effects the ongoing relation between creation and Creator, can be seen as a different-yet-similar repetition of Eucharistic signification. Like the bread that both nourishes the human being and points to the spiritual reality of the risen Christ who nourishes the soul and the church, creation itself points to a God who likewise nourishes, bridles, and directs creation toward its end. This further illumines why, and to some extent *how* Calvin wants to maintain the language of participation. While he wants to distance the source of divine power from created things, he also wants our knowledge of the divine to constantly be linked back to the truth of a relation that exists beyond and around human beings, mediated through the way revelation disposes our ability to understand our material life. This is therefore not a form of knowledge that can be mastered, but one which is realized through activities of use and the enjoyment of benefit (chapter four) within the sphere of creation—a term which perhaps could be linked, in Agamben's terminology, to *zōē*.

⁶¹ *Institutes*, 1.6.3.

What does it mean, both for Agamben's argument and for how we understand Calvin's project of reform, if Calvin's writing constructs a form of glory operative within the sphere of creation rather than political life? That exceeds the ability of earthly mediators to manage life and death directly? Calvin furthermore rebukes such attempts as idolatry.⁶² If, in fact, one traces the explicit references to glory in the overtly political parts of the *Institutes*—in the "Prefatory Address to King Francis" and in the final chapter on civil government—one finds that the sparse references to glory are situated as a warning to rulers. Rulers, like human beings, ought not to defraud God of God's glory by interfering with the practice of relating divine words that God speaks to the things that God has made; furthermore, they ought to recognize that any temporary glory held by a ruler is derived from God.⁶³

This reading of glory in contrast to Agamben's use of glory raises many more questions than I can address here. One question of critical import has to do with the basic methods of Schmittian political theology. In some ways, Calvin's writing should garner attention from those who find the link between theological articulations of power and the organization of worldly power to be a compelling one. After all, Calvin's writing represents an extended form of theological argumentation, situated within a larger project of reform during a particularly volatile time of fragmentation and upheaval in Europe—moreover, a period that foregrounds and marks the questions over the constitution of the political in modernity that concern Gauchet, Lefort, and Agamben alike. If Calvin's theological writing articulates not only a relation of divine power to the world, but also couples it with a *critique* of human authority and human acclamation precisely *as* engines of idolatry, it is worth asking how the complexity of his theology effects studies in political theology. In other words, if theological writing itself treats power and glory in a complex way, then how does this complexity manifest in a political imagination?

⁶² If one follows the logic of Elwood's argument, then one could even argue that this view of glory is not just outside of political life, but opposed to political life for Calvin.

⁶³ See *Institutes*, McNeill trans., 11. See also 4.20.26, 4.20.32.

5.

When I compared Calvin's symbolism of power to Kantorowicz's study of the king's two bodies, I suggested that we find the relationship between the particular and the abstract bodies of the king to be reversed. That is, whereas in Kantorowicz the office of the king as the seat of power is immortal, the logic of Eucharistic symbolism for Calvin seats power in the singular, mortal yet resurrected body of Christ. I would argue that a similar reorientation of the relationship between the general and the concrete can be discerned when one compares Agamben's view of glory to the one employed by Calvin. For Agamben, glory is generative of an inoperative power to which human beings become subject; for Calvin, glory obtains through *God's* acclamation of the world as good and the creation's reflection of that relation, which founds the possibility of human beings' studied (perceptive, cognitive, and affective) participation in that relation.

This underscores the importance of attending to the content of the narrative through which power is choreographed, or to what providence *looks* like. A providence that is known first through particular acts of creative affirmation, activity, and limiting engagement shapes a person differently than a form of providence conceived abstractly. This is apparent in the one place where political power is related to the choreography of providential power, which I argued is subtly visible in the final chapter of the *Institutes*. In that chapter, there is no positive analogy between political power and providential power precisely because providential participation is addressed to the individual—to the citizen—not to the ruler. Calvin addresses his writing to the Christian who is living in any society. The Christian reader is given no instructions concerning the ideal form of government nor even the laws to be established. Rather, she is instructed to affirm whatever government is in place as an intermediary through which God maintains order for the sustenance of life, and to resist only when that government transgresses

the Word of God.⁶⁴ Perhaps, then, it is more accurate to say that Calvin leaves us with resources for a political theology of the citizen more than a political theology of the state.⁶⁵

This therefore leads to the final thread to be drawn forward in this conclusion, namely that providence is a teaching both concerned with creation in the widest sense and with shaping the life of a particular human being. At this point, I hope it is apparent that these two aims are connected within Calvin's thought.⁶⁶ I have argued that providence plays an important role in his particular project of reform, in re-establishing an order of power that is both disincorporated from particularly worldly sites yet affirming of creation as the sphere of divine glory and Christian piety. I also want to argue, however, that this cannot be severed from the role of providence in situating an individual for the purpose of living out her created life in a way that is equipped to faithfully encounter its inevitabilities, including suffering and death.

Informed by Genevieve Lloyd as well as my readings of early arguments on providence in chapter two, I sought to show in chapter five that Calvin's doctrine of providence works to orient a person rightly toward the world. In this sense, providence is an ethical doctrine. Through forms of argumentation and other uses of language, including stories and hymns, providence figures the world in such a way that a human being is reoriented to be able to engage it rightly. In Calvin's writing in particular, I have argued that this reorientation involves more than merely exercises of the imagination, but also bodily practices designed to habituate the view of the world *as* the object of the divine activity

⁶⁴ This principle came more and more to be seen to undergird specific kinds of revolt on the part of citizens in seventeenth-century France. See, for example, Philip Mornay's "A Defence of Liberty Against Tyrants," which is chapter 23 in Hans J. Hillerbrand, ed., *The Protestant Reformation* (New York: Perennial, 2009).

⁶⁵ See chapter four. At the beginning, in conversation with Julia Reinhart Lupton, I made the connection to Shakespeare's interest in citizenship as a category that emerges out of considering the individual's relation to the world rather than political life *per se*.

⁶⁶ Note, also, my argument in chapter three that the "final arrangement" of the four books is one in which Christian teaching moves from creation, to individual life, and back out to collective life—yet one more signal that Calvin's thought moves intentionally between these poles.

of providence. Chief among these exercises are prayer and the practices of the church: reading and hearing the Word, participating in the sacraments. I have also argued that by emphasizing God's active willing relation to all things that happen—the source of Calvin's reputation for holding a strong or radical, even frightening, view of providence—Calvin likewise aims to direct the Christian's attention toward the world as a place of activity, effecting a kind of turn toward immanence as grounding the ethical life of the Christian.

There are ways in which this strong view of providence and its ethical effects may be read as playing right into Weber's (or Löwith's) secularization thesis. That is, by foregrounding creation itself as the sphere of both divine and human activity—the site of glory—the *telos* of providence may actually be transferred into an immanent frame and thus be transformed into an expectation of inevitable progress. In several arguments concerning secularization, this is exactly what late medieval and early modern doctrines of providence brought about: an interest in concrete material life that began to, in effect, take on a life of its own. By first orienting a person toward understanding God's will and then arguing that God's will is apparent in nature itself, interest in providence “accidentally” cultivated an interest in mastering and altering the order of nature by means of the human will. This established what for many would become the distinguishing characteristic of modern, Western subjectivity: an expectation of perpetual discovery and progress through the use of reason, ostensibly for the purposes of improving life and perhaps even eradicating death.⁶⁷ When theological forms of meaning become secularized, and thus lose their transcendent referent, or their belief in a reality beyond death and beyond this life where beatitude is consummated, then what is to become of the human need to find meaning in the face of suffering and death?—or to find meaning in embodiment and mortality? Recall Weber's concern as he describes it in “Science as Vocation”:

⁶⁷ See arguments discussed primarily in part one of chapter one, especially by Amos Funkenstein.

Abraham, or some peasant of the past, died “old and satiated with life” because he stood in the organic cycle of life; because his life, in terms of its meaning and on the eve of his days, had given to him what life had to offer; because for him there remained no puzzles he might wish to solve; and therefore he could have had “enough” of life. Whereas [a] civilized [person], placed in the midst of the continuous enrichment of culture by ideas, knowledge, and problems, may become “tired of life” but not “satiated with life.” He catches only the most minute part of what life of the spirit brings forth ever anew, and what he seizes is always something provisional and not definitive, and therefore death for him is a meaningless occurrence. And because death is meaningless, civilized life as such is meaningless; by its very “progressiveness” it gives death the imprint of meaninglessness.⁶⁸

When unending life is both rendered immanent and abstracted as the general aim of science, politics, and even ethics, this risks redefining life as a good under “threat” by death. That is, rather than death leading to another stage of life—to the promise of eternal beatitude—death within an immanent frame comes to signal a kind of failure, a premature exit, an ugliness to be avoided. Far from offering a human being the resources to face the inevitability of death, a fully secularized providence of this sort challenges the ability to situate death within an ethical framework.

Weber, of course, traces this facet of modernity in part to the effects of than Calvinist notions of providence, or more specifically a notion of providence linked to the opacity of the divine intention. In spite of historical and sociological evidence that complicates Weber’s claims about the relationship of Calvinism to capitalism, there is something undeniably true about the affinity Weber discerns between Calvinism and various features of the modern managing of social and political life. Predominantly Calvinist regions and states have given unprecedented attention to the improvement of material life, conceived of new ways of managing illness and poverty, and at times sought to manage and alter moral and social ills in ways that would have previously been deemed impossible.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Weber, “Science as Vocation,” in *Essays in Sociology*, ed. and trans. by H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946), 140.

⁶⁹ I discuss this at greater length in my introduction and the first part of chapter one.

As I have shown, however, Calvin on providence is far more complicated than the claim that providence is an opaque yet deterministic divine intention guiding the world toward hidden ends. Inasmuch as providence is a form of knowledge put to use as a form of re-naming, and beneficially re-orienting a Christian to the world as the site of God's active presence, it operates as an argument that resonates with the earlier forms of providence that Lloyd examines and that I examined in chapter two. That is, providence refigures the way different aspects of created and embodied reality are related to one another and to God. Calvin's providential arguments therefore do not attempt to grant meaning to life through narrating some particular divine intention or outcome, but by declaring that God is actively present, constantly affirming, and constantly working in the world for good. Here, Calvin stakes an ethical claim. When he insists that providence is a doctrine of comfort, offering supreme benefits to the believer who understands it, he claims that life and suffering are given meaning not through explanations, but through an attitude that effectively asserts the fundamental goodness of life. God's activity is not comforting because a Christian knows that it will prevent suffering, but rather because a Christian is assured that God finds life to be worthwhile and worth maintaining in spite of its attendant pain. This enables a believer to see the world *as if* it is affirmed by God, and thus elicits a kind of ethical orientation that follows from this attention to reality in these terms.

For Calvin, of course, this argument relies upon the existence of God and the promise of beatitude beyond death. But the difference that may be discernible between this formulation of providence and the other two more common versions—that either the self must be resigned to the necessity of the world (Stoic) or that providence is realized in the final scene of divine judgment (broadly Augustinian)—is that for Calvin, the transcendent often functions to point to the immanent. Transcendence reveals that immanent creation shines with glory in all of its frailty and even in spite of the damaging effects of the fall. This, perhaps even unintentionally, suggests a kind of providential will that does not operate by intention (or, in secularized terms, the goal of infinite progress), but rather

through affirmation of a world in which life and death are related to one another as conditions of a mortality that is fundamentally created good and primordially upheld by God.

Thus we find that when Calvin discusses the proper affective responses to suffering on the part of the believer, he neither calls for resignation nor does he too easily turn to the palliative of a future life. Instead, he refers to those times when the Word itself is stopped, is silenced by its own suffering:

It is not as the Stoics of old foolishly described “the great-souled man”: one who, having cast off all human qualities, was affected equally by adversity and prosperity, by sad times and happy ones—nay, who like a stone was not affected at all.... We have nothing to do with this iron philosophy which our Lord and Master has condemned not only by his word, but also by his example. For he groaned and wept both over his own and others’ misfortunes. And he taught his disciples in the same way: “The world,” he says, “will rejoice; but you will be sorrowful and will weep.” And that no one might turn it into a vice, he openly proclaimed, “Blessed are those who mourn.” No wonder! For if all weeping is condemned, what shall we judge concerning the Lord himself, from whose body tears of blood trickled down? If all fear is branded as unbelief, how shall we account for that dread with which, we read, he was heavily stricken? If all sadness displeases us, how will it please us that he confesses his soul “sorrowful even to death”?⁷⁰

Yet the outcome of following the narrative of Christ is affirmation and obedience to the conditions providence has affirmed along with a promise for the ultimate good. Thus, even for Christ, “the conclusion will always be: the Lord so willed, therefore let us follow his will. Indeed, amid the very pricks of pain, amid groaning and tears, this thought must intervene: to incline our heart to bear cheerfully those things which have so moved it.”⁷¹

In the implicit ethics of providence, we find perhaps another kind of signature—not one that necessarily moves between the theological and the political, but between writings. The confessional legacy of Calvinism remains plagued by contradictions over these very issues: how to relate knowledge and reason to life and death, affection to politics, justice to the vagaries of immanent existence, and perhaps most importantly, scripture to life. If my project has lifted up one issue to contribute to the

⁷⁰ *Institutes* 3.8.9.

⁷¹ *Institutes* 3.8.10.

thought of these questions in relation to Calvin's writing, it may have been to pinpoint the crucial importance of how reading and writing are related to our ability to perceive and ultimately participate in our world. Perhaps it is the case that Calvin's critiques of the materialization of divine power have led many of his followers to prioritize the Word over and against material life, to treat Christian teaching as if it were primarily a matter of getting the words right and then imposing them in one way or another on life. However, I have argued that there is ample evidence that Calvin sees divine words as given precisely to present material life more accurately, to reveal the glory that is already inscribed within it but which fallen dimness fails to perceive. Scripture is analogous to spectacles that enable vision, not to the thing seen; knowledge is realized in usefulness and benefit; providence works through, is clothed by, real intermediaries. The contemplation of God that becomes possible when scripture enables one to navigate the labyrinth is the ability to contemplate the world rightly.

Yet, perhaps this argument also suggests that the complexity of Calvinism should prompt a reader to look for its other unauthorized and perhaps more fragmentary legacies. For example, the relationship between a critique of metaphysical presence, an affirmation of this life as the "school of piety," and rethinking providence as neither mere resignation nor mere teleological intention is a kind of signature that becomes visible in a number of other ethical arguments, especially during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While Calvin himself clearly maintains the horizon of transcendent consummation, his providential arguments primarily obtain—that is, they bring benefit—from using words and practices to re-present the world and thus acclimate the subject to present realities. This has the more general effect of situating a meaning for life through a *relationship* with tactics of transcendence that only obtain, or becomes actualized, in returning the subject to immanence, it is a kind of ascetic work aimed at enabling a believer, with Christ, to say, "Yes."

There is something akin to this in yet another author I discussed in chapter one. Once again, Tyler Roberts describes Nietzsche's ethics of affirmation in the following way:

Nietzsche's asceticism is not the life-denying asceticism of the ascetic ideal, suffering practiced for the sake of ending all suffering, but a practice of opening oneself to the conflicting, painful reality of life and world in active engagement with them. This asceticism recognizes and affirms the power of suffering in the creation of spirit; it is a practice of suffering.... Nietzsche's is a practice of writing and thinking in which he cultivates the openness to, even the participation with, becoming. Rather than metaphysical mastery, Nietzsche as writer practices a responsiveness to the mystery and the power of the world—or, as I have put it, a passion for the real, passion in the sense of strong desire, and in the sense of the pain of submission to the real. Only with such passion is the creation of spirit possible: in Nietzsche's ascetic/mystical practice of transfiguration, suffering leads to joy, abysmal thought and bodily pain are transfigured into affirmative spirit.⁷²

In spite of many intervening and important differences between Calvin and Nietzsche, there is something resonant between their basic ethical orientation: both insist on a deep connection between life itself, a strong and active (providential) will, and a goodness that exists beyond the opposition of life and death, pain and pleasure. A particularly immanent form of ethics comes to fruition in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and other more recent writings; yet there may be something of this sensibility already in a sixteenth-century view of providence as a divine will that wills light and dark, and that nonetheless brings joy to the living. There is, furthermore, a resonance that extends even to the notion of glory. As in Calvin's writing, Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* flips the relationship between glory and eternal life that Agamben traces in so many Jewish and Christian texts. That is, for Nietzsche, glory does not acclaim a form of eternal life that is abstracted from natural life, but rather the refrains of acclamation emerge from and toward life itself, precisely after Zarathustra has made the movement of affirmation of eternal recurrence of all things:

One!
Oh humankind, pray!

⁷² Tyler T. Roberts, *Contesting Spirit: Nietzsche, Affirmation, Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 168.

Two!
 What does deep midnight have to say?
Three!
 "From sleep, from sleep –
Four!
 From deepest dream I made my way –
Five!
 The world is deep,
Six!
 And deeper than the grasp of day.
Seven!
 Deep is its pain –,
Eight!
 Joy – deeper still than misery:
Nine!
 Pain says: refrain!
Ten!
 Yet all joy wants eternity –,
Eleven!
 – wants deep, wants deep eternity!"
*Twelve!*⁷³

Or, in the words of Calvin, who makes a puzzling claim while arguing for providence as a divine will that wills all things, even those things which are against its will:⁷⁴ "Ignorance of providence is the ultimate of all miseries; the highest blessedness lies in the knowledge of it."⁷⁵

⁷³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 184.

⁷⁴ See my discussion in chapter five and *Institutes* 1.18.3.

⁷⁵ *Institutes*, 1.17.11.

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